Genre, The Postmodern, and American Western Cinema:

A Study of the Films of Clint Eastwood, Quentin Tarantino, and Joel and Ethan Coen

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ABSTRACT

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Western genre film is a cornerstone of American cinema. Throughout the 20th century, its formal content and set of values helped to define to other nations and to American citizens how we perceived ourselves, as it endeavored to immortalize and mythologize our founding and development. The genre has evolved dramatically over since its inception, and to this point that evolution has been divided critically at the year 1945. Every western film that came before that year is now considered "Classical," and every film since called either "Postwestern" or "Neowestern." In this project, I strove to complicate our notion of these divisions by examining three films produced in the last 25 years: Clint Eastwood's *Unforgiven* (1992), Quentin Tarantino's *Django Unchained* (2012), and Joel and Ethan Coen's *No Country for Old Men* (2007). I examine each of these films as a case study through the lenses of genre theory, and the current critical landscape surrounding each film individually. In doing so, I conclude that the current categories defining western cinema cannot adequately contain these films, and so I create a new category which I believe more accurately describes them: the Postmodern Western.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction

In his book *Post-Westerns: Cinema, Region, West*[1] Neil Campbell seeks to refute the theory— posited repeatedly by various critics since the 1930s—that the Western is a dead genre of film. "Someone is always trying to bury the Western."[2] Campbell does not intend to persuade the reader that the genre exists as it has since its inception: defined by rugged, lonely heroes chased across a nameless frontier by Indians and nostalgia for an old world already lost. Nor does he believe, as does the critic Deleuze, in the "Neowestern"—a genre which took shape after the Second World War in response to an evolution in the United States' perception of itself and by extension its foundation myth, which the classical western propagates. Campbell posits that the Western films produced after 1945 make up a kind of "posthumous" genre, which fill the "empty frame" left behind by the Westerns that came before with new ideas that respond to a changing political, social, and economic world. These films function through their employment of the archetypes and defining characteristics of the Classical Western in ways that differ from them. In this way, they rise from the apparent deaths of their predecessors, but are always haunted by them; a relationship Campbell dubs the Postwestern's "Ghosts."[3]

Primarily, Campbell's book functions as an extension and, ultimately, a refutation of Deleuze's work in *Cinema 1* and *Cinema 2,* which contain the author's theories of genre and—most fruitfully for Campbell's purposes— the Neo-Western. (a term coined in the former of the

[1] Campbell, Neil. 2013. *Post-Westerns: Cinema, Region, West*. Lincoln, NE: U of Nebraska P, 2013.
[2] Ibid. 19.
[3] Ibid 2.

two volumes) Campbell agrees with Deleuze's claim that "America's greatest film genres, including the Western, might appear to 'collapse' through revisionism and new forms during the immediate postwar period, and yet in the end . . . they simply 'maintain their empty frame.'"[4] In other words, while Neowestern films seek to respond to shifting perceptions of the classical western, and the mythologies they establish, they inevitably promote the same distorted stories of rugged individualism, and the ultimate triumph of the white male over his environment. But more significantly, he disagrees with Deleuze regarding the makeup of the frame itself. "For Deleuze the Western was destined to retell the same stories of expansionism and Manifest Destiny, often parodying but ultimately asserting the values embedded in its creation story . . . He felt American cinema's 'empty frame' was too powerfully persistent to really present new images of thought . . . I argue that Deleuze is wrong and that we can indeed find [the Western] reconfigured and renewed." (Campbell 2013, 47) Therefore it is the formal characteristics of the Western, rather than its values, that provide the framework for new and ever evolving ideas, and it is by virtue of these formal characteristics that the genre lives on.

Inspired in part by Campbell's relationship to Deleuze, I want to both extend and subvert Campbell's argument for the Postwestern. I do not quite agree with Deleuze's defining Western films after 1945 to the present as *Neo*western. Many of the western films produced beginning in that year do indeed fall under the category, but to claim that any western since *must* do so is a generalization. Bifurcating the genre along the boundaries of "Classic" and "Post" at the year 1945, however, is also an oversimplification. It is true that in Ford's films, for instance, a gulf distinctly appears between works such as *Stagecoach* (1939) and *the Searchers*

[4] Ibid. 3.

(1956). In a sense Ford is reacting to his past work and the work of contemporaries, extending the genre to address issues of moral ambiguity, insanity, and masculinity. In fact, *the Searchers* readily falls within the Neowestern category. While Ford seeks to revise his conception of the western by employing the same actor from his earlier films to play a man wracked with grief and unable to relinquish old prejudices, the character and the film as a whole maintain much of the values of those older films. For example, Ethan Edwards eventually sees the error of his ways, but returns to the frontier, wishing to maintain control of that environment rather than cope with the new reality his rescuing Debbie presents. It is impossible, therefore, to extricate Ford from the Classic Western tropes he created almost singlehandedly. Any evolution comes from within rather than without the traditional notions of what constituted a western film. One might call it a cannibalization, rather than a progression, and in the end Deleuze's version of the framework holds true. Themes of loss, and even nostalgia, remain intact.

The same cannot be said for Western films beginning in the early 1990's, with directors such as Quentin Tarantino and Joel and Ethan Coen at the helm. Therefore, a line must be drawn between them and other Western films since 1945: a third category. Examples include *No Country for Old Men* (2007) *Django Unchained* (2012), and *Unforgiven* (1992). I would argue that these films conform to Campbell's theory that the formal content of the genre—the hero, the geography, the guns and the dust— provides the structure that makes them Westerns, rather than the values they "parody but ultimately assert." In other words, they are not quite Neowesterns. But neither are they examples of Campbell's Postwesterns. The tropes which Campbell claims "fill the empty frame" are not concretely maintained, but instead are often destabilized. For example, a defining characteristic of Westerns pre- and post-1945 is their

emphasis on an anonymous, usually desolate landscape: a bygone frontier town, or Monument valley. The anonymity is championed, because it allows a freedom of choice civilization can't abide. But in the Western after 1990, geography is specific: Chickasaw County, Mississippi (*Django Unchained*[5]*),* or Los Angeles, California. (*The Big Lebowski*[6]*)* The loss of anonymity is both a result of and a formalistic response to the eventual enclosure of the frontier the Classical Western so often predicts. The defining characteristic of these films is not their employment of the frame itself, or even whether or not it exists. They evidence something new because they fall in a space somewhere between the two categories defined by Campbell and Deleuze, by incorporating elements of both.

These films do in fact fill up the vacuum left by the classical western with new ideas, which do not, I believe, reassert the same values championed by the classical western. They do not simply subvert our knowledge of those values, but stand in direct opposition to them. Each film is in some way a reflection of uniquely postmodern realities: globalization, ever increasing racial and gender equality, shifting notions of manhood and what it requires. Those new values are apparent specifically because they're posited through critique of the morality this genre previously championed. In this way, they incorporate Campbell's Postwestern.

In order to illustrate how these films also incorporate Deleuze's Neowestern into their structure, I must explain in a bit more detail what exactly that means. In *Cinema 1, the Movement-Image,* Deleuze states that what he actually means by "image" is a kind of slice of

[5] *Django Unchained*. Directed by Quentin Tarantino. Performed by Jamie Foxx, Cristoph Waltz. United States: Columbia Pictures, 2012. Film.
[6] *The Big Lebowski*. Directed by Joel Coen and Ethan Coen. Performed by Jeff Bridges, John Goodman. United States: PolyGram Filmed Entertainment Presents, 1998.

life: every moment is a new slice that can be examined from one's own perspective. The universe is a many-faceted jewel of differing perceptions, and each facet of that jewel is a different "perception-image." This is important for the cinema because according to this definition of images, each shot becomes a slice of life, a perception-image controlled by the creative mind(s) behind the lens. With this in mind, Deleuze splits the Neowestern from the western at 1945 because of the kinds of perception images he believes the films prioritize. Prior to '45, films like *Stagecoach* emphasized the movement-image. Many of the tropes we think of in relation to the classical western (which here means films before 1945, and I use throughout this work to mean "films not of the postmodern western I am describing") The movement-image emphasizes action, and the power the characters possess to manipulate their environment, or as he calls it, the "milieu."[7] In the western, that milieu is the frontier, and the characters in the film besides the protagonist. The protagonist will always achieve his goals, triumph over evil, and favor the wilderness over civilization. Deleuze claims the Neowestern, by contrast, prioritizes the *time*-image. In the wake of World War II, Americans began to reassess their place within the modern world order, and by extension began to question the self-propagated myth of their own founding. In other words, they began to question the implications of Manifest Destiny and the American Dream, two ideologies without which the classical western could not exist. The Neowestern's shift to an emphasis on the time-image, therefore, is a result of that reassessment. Rather than always placing the western protagonist—who represents the ideal culmination of capitalist American ideologies—in control

[7] Gilles Deleuze. *Cinema 2: The Time-Image,* translated by Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam. Minneapolis, MN: U of Minnesota P, 1986.

of the action and milieu, the time-image forces him (for it is always a him) to become an observer. As such, the world of the western becomes altogether different. The protagonist continually tries and fails to exert his influence on a different world. Another key element of the Neowestern, though, is that the values the protagonist asserts are ultimately maintained.

The result of combining the elements of these two differing ideological forms is, in my opinion, an entirely new category, and a new era for the genre which I have dubbed the Postmodern Western. I use the term "postmodern" here to denote two tendencies of postmodern cinema: 1) to distrust and complicate traditional cultural ideologies, admitting that they are largely constructed, and 2) to formally deconstruct and intermingle the lines between different genres and styles. The genre reclaims the formalistic elements of all the westerns before, subverting, revising, and translating them onto new places and kinds of characters. They maintain a balance, not quite transferring the old tropes, but never straying too far from them either. Furthermore, they implement, as they please, elements of both the time-image and the movement-image, allowing themselves either option and therefore not wholly characterized by either. As a result, a final element of the Postmodern Western must be mentioned: it is now an auteur's genre. None of the films follow exactly the same formal or structural patterns, but pick and choose from an encyclopedic knowledge of the westerns which came before. The films are in many ways love letters to the westerns of old as much as they are critiques of them. Each chapter of this thesis will examine a director, and one of their films which potentially fall within the parameters of the Postmodern Western. The films are Clint Eastwood's *Unforgiven,* the Coen Brothers' *No Country for Old Men,* and Quentin

Tarantino's *Django Unchained.* Ultimately, I hope to use each director/film as a case study for implementing my ideas about the new genre I have decided to create.

Chapter 1

Clint Eastwood and *Unforgiven*

Clint Eastwood's work bears a complex relationship with the other films and directors of the Postmodern Western. The films of the Coen Brothers and Tarantino tend to employ the archetypes of the Classical West in order to either critique them or call attention to the differences in message and themes by the employment of such tropes. Eastwood, however, in certain senses upholds the same traditions he means to subvert. As a result, his work falls much more readily into the category of the Neowestern described by Deleuze in *Cinema 1.* Often, Eastwood's work presents an evolution of the Classical themes that seems only inadvertently to ever stray from the tradition of their predecessors.

For instance, his first Western film, *High Plains Drifter* (1973)[8] "clearly reflects the influence of Sergio Leone," (Cornell 2009, 10) particularly the *Dollars* Trilogy that brought Eastwood into the cultural consciousness as an actor. The protagonist, called the Stranger, directly mimics Leone's protagonist of the same name. *Drifter's* own Stranger also blows into a town rife with violence and despair, and seems the harbinger of righteous vengeance. However, the director reveals through a series of disjointed flashbacks that the town the Stranger defends has endured emotional and physical trauma at the hands of a gang they'd originally hired to murder their own marshal. The Stranger's job it to protect the town form the monsters they created. What's more, the Stranger – our supposed hero—commits brutal acts of violence himself, and prepares to torment the gang he is assigned to assassinate before he kills them, as if he knew the Marshal they'd murdered on behalf of the town. Eastwood

[8] *High Plains Drifter,* Directed by Clint Eastwood. Universal City, CA: Universal Pictures, 1973.

seemingly intends to portray the Stranger to some of the members of the town as the righteous good, and the gang as the evil the protagonist must eradicate. And although an ulterior motive for the Stranger's brutality is heavily implied, he never directly explains himself to anyone. The closing shots of the film find him riding away with Sarah Belding, the female protagonist, who decides to abandon the town for what they did to the Marshal. Thus the lines of morality remain ambiguous, a far cry from the classical western's tendency of clearly delineating good from evil. In the end, Eastwood's Stranger is quite unlike Leone's. Throughout the next two decades, Eastwood's films continue to muddle the boundaries of the traditional Western protagonist. Specifically, he subverts traditional notions of masculinity and the mythologizing of the Western hero. However, Eastwood tends to explore the evolution of such themes through the lens of the tradition structure and stylistic archetypes of the Western genre form. In Derrida's words, the "marks"[9] of the Western genre remain mostly as they appear in films such as *Stagecoach* (1939).

Furthermore, the evolution of themes like ethical ambiguity do not necessarily exhibit a clean break in either style or genre from the films of Ford or Leone. For example, the central character of John Ford's *The Searchers* (1956)[10] arguably experiences a slow descent into madness as he attempts to rescue his niece from the Comanches who stole her and murdered the rest of Ethan's family. While on the surface Ethan's years long mission of recovery seems an act of immense dedication and heroism, Ethan soon discovers to his horror that his niece has become one of the wives of the Comanche's leader. She seems to have assimilated into the

[9] Derrida, Jacques. Trans. Avita Ronell. "The Law of Genre." *Critical inquiry 7,* no. 1: 55-81, 1980.
[10] *The Searchers.* Directed by John Ford. Los Angeles, CA: Warner Bros., 1956.

tribe, which according to Ethan is a fate worse than death. In a terrifying scene, Ethan finally rescues her, but seems to think that she can never return to her previous life, having been so long exposed to the Comanche's tribal culture. Ethan's partner throughout the escapade, whom had grown up with Laurie, barely keeps Ethan from strangling her.

Obviously, such an act of evil from the protagonist, the actor of which two decades previously only ever played the unambiguous hero of Ford's Westerns, is evidence that *High Plains Drifter* was not groundbreaking simply for its morally ambiguous protagonist. Ethan's character undergoes an evolution after his encounter with Laurie, however. In the end, he realizes that her experiences with the Comanches have not irrevocable taken her beyond the pale, if they ever had to begin with. Ethan moves on in the closing shot of the film with a measure of peace. The Stranger, on the other hand, never has a catharsis. His violent habits are vilified, rather than condemned. Eastwood's apparent taste for leaving his protagonists in ethical limbo and even existential despair carries over into perhaps his most important Western, *Unforgiven* (1992).[11] From this point forward, *Unforgiven* will be the primary subject of inquiry regarding Eastwood's work, because it crystallizes the director's relationship with the classical western as it evolves over the next two decades of his career. Like *High Plains Drifter, Unforgiven* is a direct stylistic and thematic descendant of the films of Leone and Ford. However, the film does present a significant shift in the depiction of the solitary, rugged Western protagonist. Gilles Deleuze's *Cinema 1* explores in detail the archetypes of the

[11] *Unforgiven.* Directed by Clint Eastwood. Burbank, CA: Warner Bros, 1992.

Hollywood, and particularly the Western, male protagonist, describing him in terms of what he calls the "Minor" and the "Major" form.

"Large Form" cinema is constituted primarily by the "action image:" "the milieu and its forces incurve on themselves. They act on the character, throw him a challenge, and constitute a situation in which he is caught . . . he must acquire a new mode of being or raise his mode of being to the demands of the milieu and of the situation."[12] The "minor form" is the large form's exact reverse, in that it is constituted by an action, which triggers a situation, to which the character responds with another action. In classical western cinema, these two forms reside in the rugged individualist male, who both shapes and responds to his environment. "There was a big gap between the situation and the action to be undertaken but this gap only existed to be filled"[13] by the hero. The milieu of the classical western— expansive, anonymous, and unforgiving— is mirrored by the problems faced by the hero, which only he can conquer. Regarding the *Neo*western that he subsequently outlines, the delineating characteristic (as I mentioned before) is the loss of faith in that masculine protagonist, who represented American ideals (democracy, concrete definitions of right and wrong) complicated by American exposure to the horrors of the Second World War.

Eastwood uses the characters and plot structures of these films as a jumping point for exploring similar themes as they have evolved throughout the second half of the twentieth century. He expands the thematic explorations of moral ambiguity in the Western to include studies of the problems inherent to American masculinity, depictions of violence, and the

[12] Gilles Deleuze. *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image.* Translated by Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986. 141.
[13] Ibid. 165.

mythologizing of the West and its heroes. But in wishing to critique the Classical Western's tendency to romanticize some of the problematic habits of the Western and the reality it purported to depict, Eastwood often holds them up, precisely falling into the trap of the Deluezian Neowestern. That said, *Unforgiven* attempts to present a more realistic depiction of the experience of the archetypal rugged-individualist protagonist. However, a realistic Western protagonist is a contradiction in terms, and while Eastwood knows it, his reluctance to wholly leave behind Leone's Stranger archetype prevents Eastwood from a successful critique of the problems he sees in the classical western. We're left with a protagonist which could never be described as fully Postwestern, because certain values are, as Deleuze predicts, ultimately asserted. But does the film ultimately qualify as a Postmodern Western? Perhaps a more careful examination will deliver the answer.

One of the major themes of the film, which draws influence from films like *the Man Who Shot Liberty Valence*[14] (1962) and represents one of the films major points of progression from the classical western, is the separation between the legacy or mythology of a character and their true selves. In other words, the Western's preference for mythology over reality. In *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valence,* Ransom Stoddard builds his life and career around the public knowledge that he killed the evil Valance. In reality, it was Tom Doniphan, not Stoddard, who killed him. Doniphan recognized that Stoddard could give the woman Tom loved a better life than he, and so he forces Stoddard to pretend. The plot of the film is staged as a series of flashbacks, after Stoddard and his wife return to she and Doniphan's hometown to pay their

[14] *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance.* Directed by John Ford. Los Angeles, CA: Paramount Pictures, 1962.

last respects. Stoddard decides to tell the true story of Liberty Valance's death to the editor of the local newspaper, for whom he used to work. At the end of his tale, when the truth is revealed, Mr. Scott rips up the notes. Stoddard asks if they've decided not to print the story, to which Scott replies, "This is the West, sir. When the legend becomes fact, print the legend."[15] Stoddard leaves seemingly disappointed, but never contradicts him. Perhaps he decides that the truth matters less than the benefits others reap from what they believe the truth to be.

In *Unforgiven,* on the other hand, mythology always gives way to harsh reality. The Schofield Kid sought Munny out for his mission because of the stories he had heard from his uncle about Munny's exploits as a bounty hunter. From what the Kid has heard, Munny is the most murderous villain that ever walked the West. His first meeting with Munny, however, is less than what he had expected. The Kid finds Munny wrestling in the mud with his pigs, attempting to separate the sick from the healthy members of the group. "You don't look no meaner-than-hell cold-blooded damn killer."[16] But the Kid takes him on anyway, assuming everything his uncle said to be true. Throughout their time together, Munny attempts to disabuse the Kid of his perception of Munny's past, as ashamed of the stories as he is of the truth. He explains that most of his violent behavior was brought on by drunkenness, and that his late wife had cured him of his wicked ways. His lucky scrapes with death he attributes to forces beyond his control. But the Kid, like Mr. Scott, prefers the myth to the man, because he must rely on Munny due to his own lack of experience.

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[15] Ibid.

[16] Cornell, Drucilla. *Clint Eastwood and Issues of American Masculinity.* New York, NY: Fordham UP, 2009.

After Daggett executes Ned, it becomes apparent that Munny has been living under his own delusion. He created a new self with the help of his wife, and assumed it was permanent and irrevocable. But at Ned's unjustified murder, Munny returns to the same man he had always been. He downs a glass a whiskey, and opens fire on the other men. The murder is ruthless and in many cases unwarranted. After gunning five men down, Munny only stops to stare incredulously at English Bob's former biographer, who asks him about the order of his shooting down. He simply responds, "I was lucky in the order. But I've always been lucky when it comes to killin' folks."[17] The writer, who fictionalizes western "heroes" for a living, pushes him for details, probably intending to write Munny's line into a new story.

Another character shrouded in mythology is English Bob, an old gunslinger and bounty hunter who enters the town after the same bounty as Munny, the young writer in tow. Unlike Munny, who attempts to disillusion the Schofield Kid of the legend created from his story, English Bob actively propagates his own mythology. He allows the young writer to tag along, even though he could easily be a liability, so that the best version of his story is left behind. Unfortunately for English Bob, Little Bill Daggett would soon act as translator for Beauchamp, filling in the writer on all the information Bob had chosen to excise in his telling of past events. After Little Bill beats the old man senseless and has Bob and Beauchamp thrown in jail, the sheriff confiscates a book the writer had in his possession: a book he had written titled "*The Duke of Death.*" Flipping through the pages, Daggett comes across a scene, and realizes he is intimately familiar with its inspiration, as he had been present the night the event in question occurred. While the Duke himself lies, beaten and impotent, in the adjoining cell, Daggett

[17] Eastwood 1992, 02:01:04.

proceeds to tell Beauchamp what really happened that night. The fictionalized version has English Bob drawing on a man and killing him to defend the honor of a woman, but Daggett explains that Bob had simply been drunk and angry that the other man had slept with a woman he had liked. The true version of events is disappointing and absurd when compared to the story Bob had told the writer. The scene depicts a stark reversal of Stafford's circumstances in telling the story of Liberty Valance. Stafford confesses it all willingly to men who initially wish to hear, but decide the legend is preferable to the truth. English Bob, on the other hand, must watch in seething silence as his secrets are revealed, his legacy destroyed. In *Unforgiven,* the truth will out, but rarely is it preferable to either the characters or the audience. As a result, Eastwood inadvertently upholds the Classical Western's preference for legend over truth. Munny leaves the town in the dark and the rain, a far cry from the usual peaceful sunset. Having spent much of his time with the Kid rebuffing the fictionalized account of his life, Munny now understands that he, and not the Kid, was buying into a fantasy. Realizing once again his own true self, Munny would've taken the lie.

Another common problem of the Classical Western that *Unforgiven* attempts to solve is the genre's tendency to romanticize scenes of ultraviolence. Not unlike modern action films, the hero of the Western can kill without fear of retribution or guilt. The Western protagonist is a defender of the helpless, and vanquisher of the enemy. Often, as in *Once Upon a Time in the West,* the death of the villain not only saves the lives of others, but quenches the rage of a long held desire for revenge, or absolves him of some sin. In *Unforgiven,* Eastwood attempts to depict a more realistic image of murder, and its psychological aftermath. Perhaps the most emotionally arresting scene of the film occurs after Munny's sickness and hallucinations. He

catches up with his partner and the Schofield kid, to find that they have tracked their targets to a canyon. They pin one of the men down beneath his horse, and Ned prepares to fire, this time with a clear shot of their charge, who turns out to be barely older than a boy. Ned finds himself unable to shoot the boy, and must pass the rifle over to Munny. The boy tries to crawl his way to cover while Munny fires off two rounds and misses. On his third and final bullet, we hear the boy groan outside the frame. His legs writhe, his body hidden behind a boulder. Unfortunately, his death does not come quickly. He moans pitifully for water as his comrades hide, too afraid of getting hit themselves to offer him any aid, until finally Munny shouts, "Give him a drink of water, goddammit . . . we ain't gonna shoot."[18] Far from a scene of righteous revenge, Munny is regretful, full of self-loathing and empathy for the boy now waiting to die. Eastwood shoots the trio's enemies from a low angle, bringing the audience close into a final moment of intimacy between the boy and his friend, whom Munny allows to run over with a skin of water. Munny and the Schofield Kid are recast as the villains, and Ned as the unwilling accomplice. Once they're outside the range of enemy fire, Ned leaves for home.

The next day, Munny and the Kid track their remaining mark to a cabin on the outskirts of town. By a stroke of luck, he removes himself from the other members of the posse by heading outside to use the outside. At Munny's urging the Schofield kid creeps over, rips open the door, and shoots the man while he sits on the toilet, unarmed. They race away under fire, finally resting at a long tree on the plain. The Kid begins to boast of his shooting the man, all the while pulling heavily from a bottle of whiskey. Soon, he starts to cry. All Munny can say in

[18] Ibid. 01:33:24.

response is, “It’s a hell of a thing, killin’ a man.”[19] Finally, the Kid, seeking to absolve himself of his guilt, says “well I guess he had it comin’.” Munny, looking out at the horizon, simply replies, “We've all got it comin’, kid.”[20] At the start, the deaths of the men may have seemed justified, but the deed, once done, feels hollow.

When Munny learns of Ned’s demise, he returns to the town and interrupts a meeting to plan tracking he and the Kid down. He misfires on his first attempt to kill Little Bill, and is forced to shoot down four other men in order to exact his revenge. As he stands over the dying man, Little Bill says, “I don’t deserve this. To die like this.” Preparing to fire, Munny whispers, “Deserve’s got nothin’ to do with it.” Daggett may have deserved to die for accidentally killing Ned, but by that logic, Munny should’ve died long ago. Eastwood’s West is one full only of sinners. The ones who survive just get lucky.

Finally, in addition to Eastwood’s interpretations of evolved, Neowestern presentations of violence and mythology, the director subverts traditional American notions of Masculinity both influenced and propagated by the classical western. Drucilla Cornwell’s book *Clint Eastwood and Issues of American Masculinity*[21] outlines various examples of the “Eastwoodian” man’s oppositional relationship to the men of Leone and Ford. Eastwood utilizes public knowledge of his previous work as the Stranger of the *Dollars* Trilogy. He characterizes Munny’s past similarly, as a man with a reputation for a talent for violence. However, in giving Munny a family and a fully realized, complex backstory, Munny is a once violent man driven

[19] Ibid. 01:39:13.
[20] Ibid. 01:39:30.
[21] Cornwell 2009.

intended as phalluses, and therefore strangers to the town must literally hand their manhood (so to speak) over to little Bill to avoid a fight. But Bill's own manhood is undercut repeatedly. A scene shot in the wood frame of the home he is building shows the house to be crooked and overall poorly crafted. Ned's death at his hands, back into the fray out of loyalty to individuals other than himself: his wife, his children, and finally his partner Ned. The fact that Munny is motivated extrinsically directly contradicts the Deleuzian model for the Western male, who rides into town to save the day for no other reason than a desire for justice, only to leave town when the job is done. Often, the hero falls in love with a woman he meets over the course of the action. However, she is not his sole reason for action, and the hero tends to leave her behind for the open frontier. For Deleuze, the Western can only function through the unencumbered agency of the hero.

William Munny negates both standards. First, his actions tend to contradict his desires, forced to act out of duty for those he loves rather than an idealistic notion of justice. He leaves his home to join the Kid because his children are starving, and returns to the town to murder Little Bill after he learns Ned is dead. Furthermore, the only major connection the Classical Western hero has with other characters of the film prior to opening credits is either the villain, on whom the hero seeks revenge (such as in *Once Upon a Time in the West)* or with a woman whom the hero once wronged or otherwise hurt. Munny's connection to his children and to Ned motivate him to murder Little Bill and the men who attacked the prostitute, but only because he feels he must, and not out of a desire to arbitrate justice or shape the world in a positive way. Munny rejects the young prostitute, who nurses him back to health and in an ordinary Western would've been his love interest, out of duty to his dead wife. He even tells

her that he has no real choice, and that if he did, she would've been the woman he would choose. In this way, Munny is impotent to dictate his own actions.

Munny's impotence to act is not unique to his character. Each of the major characters in *Unforgiven* fail in some way to live up to the Classical Western standard of American masculinity. Ned refuses to shoot the young man in the canyon when he has a clear shot. Then, when Little Bill tortures him for information regarding the whereabouts, he eventually gives up Munny and the Kid. His weakness, which would've been considered a major breach of trust to Munny in a classical setting, not to mention abhorrent in itself, is shrugged off as unavoidable when Munny finds out. The Kid must solicit Munny's help in the first place because he is unable to find the men himself, due to his near blindness. Then, when he ultimately kills the second man, Schofield reveals he had lied about the men he killed, and begins to cry. Finally, when Munny decides to return to town to avenge Ned's death, the Kid refuses. Yet shortly after, Munny calls the Kid "the only friend I've got."[22] English Bob, after Little Bill beats and throws him in jail, lies powerlessly as Little Bill reveals the true story of the Duke of Death to Beauchamp. Then, when Beauchamp offers a gun through the bars to Bob at Little Bill's request, Bob can't bring himself to take the gun, even though killing Little Bill would mean his release. "As Mitchell Kimmel tells us, English Bob represents a discredited ideal of American masculinity, the genteel European patriarch who has no real place in American even when he tries to take up the role of gunslinger."[23] Little Bill, on the other hand, is the closest man in the film to the ideal American male. He rules the town as sheriff ruthlessly, and any man who

[22] Eastwood 1992, 01:53:16.
[23] Cornell 2009, 26.

enters must relinquish his guns to Bill. Not coincidentally, the Western gunslinger's weapons are often brought on by Bill whipping him repeatedly, was a total accident. And although he takes his death "like a man", staring Munny in the face, the fact that the most stereotypically masculine man was successfully gunned down suggests that mere machismo isn't enough to survive. The writer, who drifts from Bob to Bill and finally to Munny, is a traditionally feminine figure: he holds no weapons, and is subservient to whomever he deems the most masculine in the room. Yet it is precisely his lack of weapon, or phallus, that allows him to survive Munny's onslaught.

The final scene of *Unforgiven* muddles the answer to whether Eastwood intends to ultimately accept or reject the archetypal American male. Prior to Ned's death, Munny is not the hyper masculine drunkard of his youth. He is a repeatedly de-masculated by his failure to return to those habits following his decision to join the Schofield Kid: He has trouble mounting his horse, properly aiming a gun, and almost dies of a cold. Therefore, the return to Munny's former masculine identity and subsequent success in killing the other men might imply a reluctant acceptance on Eastwood's part of the traditional ideology. That reversion was the only way for Munny to survive life in the west. But Munny garners no solace or satisfaction in the relapse, signified both by his need to drink copiously (thereby betraying his dead wife) and the necessity for he and his children to leave the region altogether and escape west. Rather than a satisfying shot of the lone gunslinger riding off into the sunset, the final shot of the film displays the home Munny was forced to abandon, leaving behind the only place he was ever able to live peacefully. The frame, devoid of live, suggests that there no longer is a place for

men like Munny in the west, and by extension the Western. The modern conception of men like him renders them impotent, weak, and forced to run.

To return briefly to Delueze, the "milieu" that he describes, which the protagonist must enter and fill the gap between the situation and the action that must be undertaken, is as much a product of geography as it is with characters or groups. The Western hero/protagonist was uniquely suited to fill the gap because of his connection with the film's geography. He was often as anonymous and unyielding as Monument Valley. The geography of *Unforgiven* is only slightly less ambiguous than the Fordian or Leonean West. Rather than a desert, the film is set before the Rocky Mountains of Wyoming. We are vaguely aware that Munny is from the state of Missouri, but the references to established states matter much less than the anonymity the mountains lend the town and the characters. The film could just as easily have been set in Monument Valley as in the Rocky Mountains. Perhaps Eastwood waned to establish his own set of geographic epithets. The major difference, then, is that the hero is no longer well suited to fill the gap the action and milieu supply. The mountains engulf and diminish Munny rather than complement him in relation to the other characters.

One of the primary methods by which Eastwood critiques the Classical Western's approach both to images of masculinity and the simplistic dichotomy of good and evil is the way *Unforgiven* visually portrays power dynamics. In many scenes throughout the film, Eastwood literalizes power and agency in a scene by placing the character in power vertically in relation to the character with none, who is horizontal. Rather than consistently placing the protagonist or the "good" forces vertically and the evil forces horizontally, however, the placement shifts from scene to scene. In doing so, Eastwood complicates the role of the

Western Protagonist: his dominance as the sole character with agency, and his status as unquestionably good.

The first example of this tendency is unexpected, given their lack of agency in any traditional western. The morning after the men at Skinny's brothel slash Delilah's face, the other women sit around her earmarking funds to hire a bounty hunter for revenge. All of the women sit or stand vertically other than Delilah. Although she is the one in pain, she is the only woman against taking action to kill the men who harmed her. However, her position relative to the other women make it clear that she has no say. The scene is simple and innocuous, but it is

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important for two reasons relating to the film's position among other Westerns. First, the women standing together, plotting the murder of the men, offers the female form agency it does not ordinarily possess in this genre. Women tend only to be objects of sexual objectification or romantic involvement for the protagonist. But here, they are taking control, and provide the inciting conflict to which the protagonist responds. Second, the five women

[24] Eastwood 1992, 00:07:26.

standing together with purpose is the largest collective body in the film. I interpret this as another critique of the role of women in a traditional western environment. It suggests that women only possess power in numbers, compared to men who often can operate alone. Finally, the prostitutes are the only characters in the film with unimpeachably righteous motives. They possess a traditional conception of justice usually reserved for the male protagonist.

The most pronounced version of this tendency to literalize power dynamics occurs in the two scenes between Little Bill, Beauchamp, and English Bob while the latter two are in prison. As if the bars were not telling enough, Eastwood illustrates English Bob's helplessness by having him lie flat on his back in the cell, while Little Bill disabuses the writer, Beauchamp, of the real events behind the tall tales he was told. At the start of the scene, Little Bill sits at his desk reading about the "Duke of Death" while Beauchamp stands eagerly behind the bars. As the scene progresses and Little Bill begins to realize he has psychological as well as physical dominance over English Bob, he rises and walks forward until his face is pressed against the bars. Bob can only turn his head away in fury as Bill stands over him, and Beauchamp sits, deflated.

In the next scene between the three, the power dynamic has shifted slightly. Bill, desiring to become Beauchamp's new muse, lets him out of the prison. He sits at Bill's desk as he lies on a bench against the wall. Evidently, Beauchamp now holds a certain amount of power of Little Bill.

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Little Bill, however, quickly rises, reestablishing dominance in the scene. Although the technique is used repeatedly throughout the film, here it is self-contained, to the extent that the rise and fall of power between the three individuals works to characterize them as much as it holds up Eastwood's various theses about the Western. When the scene ends, Little Bill firmly dominates the other men. In fact, up to this point, he is the most powerful man in the film, reiterated by his repeated placement above all the other characters.

This tendency becomes most important when characterizing the protagonist and illustrating his position of power relative to the other characters, specifically Little Bill. Until the last minutes of the film, Munny lies prone in almost every scene including other, evidently more powerful characters. While there are near constant, more overt reminders that Munny is old and weak—such as his inability to wrangle pigs, ride his horse, or shoot a gun—this staging serves as a subliminal reminder of Munny's status. For instance, when Munny and Little Bill first

[25] Ibid. 01:00:36.

meet, Bill easily beats him to a pulp. Munny, sick and weak, falls almost immediately to the floor, allowing Bill to kick him almost to death. Munny survives, but in the next scene lies horizontally next to the prostitute Delilah, who has nursed him back to health. Even I scenes where Munny is ostensibly the expert or dominant figure, he lies prone: crawling along the ground in both scenes he and the Schofield Kid attempt to kill the men with the bounty on their heads. These shots offer a stark juxtaposition to Munny at the end of the film. When the two men are finally dead, he and the Kid take shelter under a tree. The Kid sits under the tree, while in the foreground Munny stands looking out at the horizon. For the first time, he is placed in a dominant position relative to the other character in the frame. Furthermore, the wide shot accentuates that dominance by [??] him in deep focus within his environment, but simultaneously placing him closer to the camera than any other object. Furthermore, when the shot is split into three segments, Munny and the horses are the only objects in the center of their segments, separated by an empty chasm in the middle segment. In doing so, Eastwood isolates Munny and the Kid, and visually foreshadows both their relationship and individual roles moving forward: they separate, and Munny finally becomes the sole acting agent in the film.

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Eastwood borrows these techniques from traditional western film language to depict the opposite of their traditionally intended effect. Usually, characters are shot immersed in an isolated environment in order to illustrate their insignificance in relation to it. The protagonist can shape his immediate environment, but has no power over larger issues relating to the landscape, like civilization and the closing of the frontier. *Unforgiven,* in contrast, is unconcerned with these issues, and therefore these shots serve a more local purpose: characterization. Because shots such as these are so intrinsic to the classical western, the viewer associates them with those films and their protagonists. Therefore, the shot indicates a reversion of Munny's character from weak and in need of support to his drunken gun slinging past—a character more like the classical western protagonist.

By the last scene, Munny's reversion is complete. Eastwood's Leonean upbringing (as the Stranger in the *Dollars* trilogy) which up to the final scene serves as a foil to Munny, seems to be Eastwood's primary frame of reference. After he returns to the brothel and guns down all

[26] Ibid. 01:45:52.

Little Bill's men, Munny walks to the bar for a shot. Little Bill, shot but not dead, cocks his pistol, which is quickly kicked from his hand. Little Bill, consistently the dominant figure, now lies flat on his back as Munny stands over him. This is the culmination of Eastwood's use of vertical/horizontal to denote power dynamics. While these shots largely result from the preceding action, the impact of the sudden role reversal is effective because it is accented by the same visual language employed to depict the characters' previous agency in relation to one another.

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Integral to Munny's transformation at the end of the film is his relationship with his partner, Ned, and his dead wife, Claudia. As the only friends Munny has left, each play an integral role in his initial and then continued decision to live a better life. These connections—their initiation and particularly their history—separate Munny's character from the "Stanger" archetype prominent in the traditional western. Claudia's death in particular motivates Munny to be a good man and set an example for their children. Ultimately, it is not the murder of the

[27] Ibid. 02:01:34.

men with the bounty on their heads, but the death of Ned which spurs Munny's reversion back to his old, Pre-Claudia self. In two shots, Eastwood uses the presence of a tree to represent Munny's commitment to his honest life and subsequent decision to break his promises to Claudia. In each shot, Munny makes an important decision that drives him further away from her, and the image of himself she helped to manufacture.

After the Schofield kid visits Munny and asks for his help in collecting the bounty, Munny visits his wife's grave to consider. The shot is again cut into thirds, and a gnarled tree covering Claudia's grave stands parallel with the line separating the far-left third of the frame. Munny sits at the center of the far-left third in deep focus, before setting a batch of flowers in front of Claudia's tombstone. Immediately after, he leaves the farm. The shot is matched almost precisely after Munny and the Kid successfully kill the men. As they speak under a tree, Munny begins to pull from a whiskey bottle. Soon after, they learn that Ned has been killed. Under the tree, Munny decides to return to the town as seek his revenge. At that moment, he decides to become the man he promised to Claudia he'd never be, betraying her at the moment he loses the final person who had known him both before and after he and Claudia's relationship.

Furthermore, shots such as these emphasize negative space in the frame as much or more than they do objects. The first shot in particular only contains objects in the left third of the frame, leaving only a sea of grass and sky to occupy the middle and right. In my opinion, Eastwood leaves most of the frame empty of objects in both cases in order to emphasize spectral images, or bodies which are conspicuously absent from the scene. In the first shot, Munny broods over his wife, as he projects feelings regarding his predicament onto her, trying

to discern how she would feel about his decision to leave the farm. The empty space in the frame emphasizes the absence of her body, and Munny's loneliness without her. He tries to fill up the empty space with her, using her memory as a stand-in for his own conscience. Up to the final moments of the film, that spectral image limits Munny's agency.

In the second shot, the frame is slightly more congested. Munny now has more people in his life than he did before. He even seems to care about the Schofield Kid. The relative dearth of relationships would seem to suggest an increased distance between himself and the Stranger archetype to which he'll eventually submit. That said, the middle third of the frame is totally empty, a space filled by the specter of Ned. Munny stares into the distance, hyper aware of the void Ned's arrest leaves in their group, but unable to acknowledge it outright. Doing so would be effeminate, a characteristic Munny rejects as he slowly reverts to his former ways. And because of the increased number of objects, including the horses and the mountains in the background, the frame no longer contains a space for Claudia. The void shrinks as Munny's resignation increases: resignation to sorrow, violence, and rage. When Munny learns of Ned's death, he expresses his grief in the only way remaining to him: revenge.

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In *Unforgiven,* rain is intimately tied to geography. Most westerns take place in desert-like frontier land, which often plays a partially antagonistic role in the action of the film. While the isolation offers refuge form the confines of civilization, exposure to the unforgiving wilderness presents a myriad of challenges, including potential starvation, and the threat of Native American attack. In *Stagecoach,* for instance, the Ringo Kid and company travel in constant fear of the Apaches, who rule the territory through which they must pass. In *the*

[28] Ibid. 00:18:29.
[29] Ibid. 01:45:52.

Searchers, (1956) Ethan and Pawley must comb the vast emptiness of Monument Valley as they attempt to find Ethan's niece, Debbie. The endless void of the region is as much a threat as the Comanche tribe who abducted her. *Unforgiven* contains no Native Americans, and Eastwood moves the setting from unsettled regions of New Mexico and Arizona to Wyoming. The weather there—at least in the season the film is set—is temperate, and thus the cold or heat on its own offer no legitimate threat. But Munny, weak and old as he is, is susceptible to relatively benign forms of exposure. Therefore, Eastwood employs rain in the same way Ford made use of the elements of the traditional west: an anonymous and potentially malevolent entity as dangerous as any human oppositional force. There is one difference, however. Munny is the only character for whom the weather poses a real threat. In fact, he is the only man to verbally acknowledge it's possibly destructive power. As the three men make their way to Big Whiskey, Ned asks Munny if he thinks either of them will be capable of killing the men they're after. Munny responds, "If we don't drown first."[30] By the time they reach the town, he has fallen ill.

Just as the vertical versus horizontally denoted power dynamics and the empty frame foreshadow Munny's reversion to murderous ways, rain is employed to drive home his metamorphosis. The only other instance of rain in the film occurs when Munny returns to Big Whiskey to avenge Ned. He enters the brothel a veritable specter of revenge and death.

[30] Ibid. 01:06:42.

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Eastwood again places Munny in the left third of the shot, framed by the door outside of which the rain pours. In the right half of the frame, slightly out of focus, Ned's coffin looms. The rain is not so much a cause or effect of the metamorphosis, but a reminder of its effect on the previous version of William Munny.

In the end, I believe *Unforgiven* falls within the scope of the Postmodern Western, but only just. Munny's character, bifurcated as it is, seems to represent the two Deleuzian forms of the Western. The weak man we see for most of the film emphasizes the time-image: he is an observer, incapable of directly affecting the milieu. The Munny of legend, and the one to which he reverts in the film's final moments, prioritizes the movement-image to excess. As such, Eastwood ultimately reasserts the classical western's formal characteristics. In balance, though, I believe the film strongly rejects the values of the classical western. While the protagonist himself resorts to violence and the initiative we expect from a western hero, the film never glamourizes his actions. Indeed it condemns them. Furthermore, Eastwood invokes many of the visual tropes of the classical western, but revises them, attempting a level of realism never

[31] Ibid. 01:55:15.

present in westerns before 1945. Eastwood therefore combines elements of all three varieties of western—classical, Neo-, and Post-. As such, though he seems himself rather undecided about the film's place within the larger context of the western genre, I believe it is one of the earliest examples of a Postmodern Western.

Chapter 2:

Quentin Tarantino and *Django Unchained*

Quentin Tarantino's *Django Unchained* (2012) contains many of the hallmarks of the Classical Western, particularly the baroque Westerns of Leone and of course Corbucci's *Django* films of the 1960s. The hero embarks on a quest for vengeance and to rescue his love from an evil man. There's gun slinging, horses, stand offs, and even dynamite. In many ways, the film is a love letter to the Spaghetti Westerns and B-movies to which Tarantino's work so often refers. That said, the film invests heavily in the kind of genre mixing Derrida describes in his essay on the subject.[32] To more closely inspect *Django's* relationship to the Western—specifically, whether it truly falls within the parameters of the genre—necessitates a look through Derrida's lens.

Derrida's "The Law of Genre" begins with three rules: "Genres are not to be mixed. I will not mix genres. I repeat: genres are not to be mixed. I will not mix them."[33] Such a proclamation inevitably invites cynicism, which Derrida answers immediately by explaining that such concretized delineations are impossible. The law itself is "precisely a principle of contamination, a law of impurity, a parasitic economy."[34] In other words, no one trope or signifier can exist solely within a particular genre, even if said archetype recognizably exists within one. What's more, once a trope, or "mark", is established as part of the "set" signifying or metonymic of the genre, the mark tends to bleed into other genres, carrying with it an association with the given genre's other marks. Without delving too deeply into the necessary

[32] Derrida 1980, 55.
[33] Ibid.
[34] Ibid. 59.

"excess" of these marks, (in that they exist outside of the set they signify by exceeding the set) Derrida describes these marks as a kind of stamp, that when seen on a piece of writing or work of art, automatically qualify the work as part of that set or genre.

Django incorporates elements of surrealism, the 70s era Blaxploitation film, and even gothic horror. Tarantino subverts and often replaces many of the defining elements of the Western genre: specifically, the concretization of geography and time, the critique of white southern identity, and the necessity for destruction rather than preservation of the Western/ white American regional sensibility. These components blend to form a graphic illustration of the underbelly of the very culture the Western tends to idealize.

For proof that *Django* takes cues from the 1970s Blaxploitation subgenre, look no further than the opening shots of the film. The credits begin to roll as a line of bare backs scarred with lashes make their way across the desert, led by three white men on horses. The Blaxploitation subgenre originally was often used in order to illustrate the horrors of slavery with acuity. Tarantino adopts its stylistic devices for the same purpose, simultaneously mixing images of the scars left by slavers with the same blood red script used in the original *Django* Westerns, from which the film gets its name. Rather than adhere strictly to the norms of Blaxploitation film to garner sympathy for the plights of the slaves, Tarantino reverse the agency of the Antebellum era white/black relationship with two characters: Django, a former slave (and the protagonist), and Stephen—the head house slave, who is seemingly subservient to his master Calvin Candie, but increasingly becomes an authoritative figure. In fact, *Django Unchained* is an explosion of the Leonean Stranger revenge plot. Django quests for revenge on the man whom had enslaved his wife and killed his only friend. But in the process, Django must

shake off the bonds of slavery, and lift himself up to equal status with his former captors. Thus, Django's revenge is not simply on Calvin Candie, but the righteous revenge of the entire black race upon their captors: the slavers of the Antebellum south.

When Dr. King Schultz finds Django, he is simply one of a chain gang headed south to their new masters. As Schultz examines the slaves, each turns his head down, the image of contrition and obedience. Schultz attempts to pay the slavers for Django, but a fight ensues, which ends with each of the slavers either dead or trapped beneath their horse. Schultz frees Django and the other slaves. The others proceed to pick up their former master's rifle and shoot him in the head. Their almost instantaneous progression from passive slaves to ruthless murders foreshadows Django's transition of a similar but more pronounced nature. Furthermore, their murder of the slaver is presented as nothing if not justified. Unlike the conflicted hero of *Unforgiven,* Django is a fully realized Leonean harbinger of justice. What's more, the opening scene implies that Django is not unique among slaves, even while he claims to be "that one in ten thousand."[35] Therefore Django is not purely an individual like the Stranger, but a representative of racial fury. Adilifu Nama's *Race on the QT*[36] tracks the way Tarantino's films approach issues of race and racism in its various forms. The final chapter, "*Inglourious Basterds and Django Unchained,"* elucidate the director's treatment of race specifically within the western genre. *Django Unchained,* he writes, critiques the blatantly racist representation of minorities and often nostalgic depictions of the Antebellum South by placing a black man in opposition to a cruel and oppressive pre-Civil War South, characterizing Django

[35] *Django Unchained.* Directed by Quentin Tarantino. New York, NY: The Weinstein Company, 2012.
[36] Nama, Adilifu. *Race on the QT.* Austin: University of Texas Press, 2015.

as "living myth, a specter of righteous retribution.[37]" The reversal of historical black/white power structure is employed repeatedly throughout the film, and hints at the "collective racial fury on the part of enslaved black folk of the time."[38]The theme of righteous revenge, so often employed in Westerns such as *Once Upon a Time in the West*, here manifests in revenge on the group traditionally championed by the Western genre.

After Schultz frees Django, the duo travel to a small frontier town, where unbeknownst to Django, Schultz intends to collect on a bounty. As they enter the town, many of the locals stare openmouthed at Django as he rides by. Schultz asked Django about them, to which he replies, "they ain't never seen no nigga on no horse before."[39] After sitting down for a beer, Schultz explains to Django that he is a bounty hunter, and bought Django so that he could help identify his next target, the Brittle brothers, with whom Django was intimately familiar. Django responds to Schultz's proposition by saying, "Kill white people and they pay you for it? What's not to like?"[40] Soon after, Tarantino, through a flashback, explains that the Brittle brothers were at one time the overseers of a plantation on which Django and his wife lived and worked. When the couple were found attempting to escape, they branded the two of them on their faces, effectively forcing Django's wife Broomhilda into a life of prostitution, and separate the two of them. Tarantino's cut to Broomhilda's face just before she is branded with the runaway "r" is sudden and forceful. The edit, the style of which often Tarantino employs for humor, is instead nothing short of horrific. The almost lustful gaze of her owner as he describes their

[37] Ibid. 108.
[38] Ibid. 116.
[39] Tarantino 2012, 00:14:26
[40] Ibid. 00:18:54.

punishment again recalls the fetishized white on black violence of Blaxploitation. When Schultz and Django find the Brittle brothers at a plantation in Gatlinburg, Django whips one of them with the weapon the overseer was about to use to punish a slave. The other slaves stare at Django in wonder. "Y'all wanna see something'?"[41] He says before shooting the man five times in the chest. In this scene, Django is framed as a violent Moses: a distortion of the biblical liberator. Schultz rides up with a rifle, takes aim, and shoots the third brother. Blood sprays on the cotton on Ellis Brittle falls form his horse. Schultz calls Django's behavior a tad overzealous, because at the time, he was unaware of the exact connection between Django and the Brittle Brothers. Like all Western heroes, Django is a man with a mysterious past. His freedom, and the cash he earns from working with Schultz, are secondary to his desire to exact his revenge on all the slavers who had mistreated him, and his wish to ultimately retrieve his wife. The violence in the scene is gratuitous and hyper stylized. The bright colors, particularly of the blood, stand in stark contrast to the shades of gray which cast the flashback narrating Django's connection with the brothers. The gratuitous depiction of black on white violence illustrates a reversal both of normative Antebellum power relations, and of the violence of the Blaxploitation film.

A scene which reverts the reversal of black/ white power permeating *Django* back to the white physical and sexual subjugation of blacks occurs once Django is captured by the men of Candieland, after Shultz kills Calvin Candie and is murdered himself. Django is tied naked by his feet to the ceiling, his penis and the scars on his back clearly visible. One of Calvin's henchmen, Billy Crash, saunters in with an enormous bowie knife. He sticks the blade in the coals of a nearby fire, intending to cut off Django's testicles and cauterize the wound. Mercifully, Crash is

[41] Ibid. 00:37:26.

shooed away before the act can occur, but the image of heinous sexual violence directly descends from similar images in the Blaxploitation film. The act is soon returned in kind, however. Once Django frees himself and returns to Candieland, Django keeps Crash alive by shooting him in the groin, reluctant to end his life only because it would put an end to Crash's pain.

In addition to *Django's* references to the "marks" of the Blaxploitation novel, Adilifu Nama posits in *Race on the QT* that *Django Unchained* also includes many elements, or marks, of gothic horror. "But with *Django Unchained*, the sightlines for viewing an Italian subgenre of the Western as a statement about black enslavement are obscure. The film clearly has more in common with the Gothic horror aesthetic found in films like *The Beguiled* . . . than any Spaghetti Western."[42] Primarily, he refers to Django and Broomhilda, whom he characterizes as spectral images of love and revenge that often pervade the Gothic horror novel. While I disagree with Nama's claim that the elements of the Gothic outdistance the film's relation to Leone's Westerns, *Django's* predilection for gothic melodrama is undeniable, and additional proof that Tarantino's film participates in exactly the kind of genre mixing Derrida describes.

A second examination of the film's first scene predicts, according to Nama, the gothic "excesses"[43] in *Django.* The forest setting, for example, is a reference to the mystical, labyrinthine forests of novels like Radcliffe's *Romance of the Forest*, rather than simply a convenient way to confine the characters while out of doors. Such gothic forests often exhibit otherworldly properties, usually affecting a kind of alteration or "metamorphosis"[44] in the

[42] Nama 2015, 107.
[43] Ibid.
[44] Ibid.

characters. For Django, and the other slaves on the chain gang to a lesser degree, that metamorphosis arrives in the form of a German dentist who opens before Django a life heretofore unimagined. The transition from black slave to bounty hunter would indeed have been so unlikely that only providence, or destiny, could have brought it about.

Another, more problematic example which Nama cites occurs after Django decides to help Schultz identify the Brittle brothers. Acting as Schultz's servant, Django dons a suit Nama dubs "an electric 'Blue Boy' Little Lord Fauntleroy costume."[45] Having chosen the suit himself, Nama cites the costume as evidence that Django has "[exceeded] the logic, rules and requirements of realism and historical fact but who definitely meets the demands of a Gothic aesthetic."[46] His wardrobe, in addition to a mirror which distorts Django's face and hands before he whips and assassinates the Big John and Little Rog Brittle, work together to establish Django as a living myth, "a specter of righteous retribution."[47] The extension beyond the realm of realism into the fantastic is the sole reason, per Nama, that Django is allowed to murder the two white men with impunity.

Other examples of *Django*'s gothic excesses abound. Nama mentions a bathing scene while Django is spending the winter with Schultz. While washing himself in an icy river, Django sees through the mist the spectral image of his wife neck deep in the water. The ghostly image references elements of the supernatural that are a hallmark to gothic fiction. As in the film, ghostly images of dead or lost lovers often appear to warn or guide the protagonists. Further possible evidence of supernatural forces at play occurs shortly before, when Schultz tells

[45] Ibid. 108.
[46] Ibid.
[47] Ibid.

Django the story of Broomhilda and Siegfried. As Schultz recites to Django, he begins to draw connections between the protagonists' relationship in the legend and Django and Hildy's relationship. Possibly, he seems to think, Schultz has found the human manifestation of the legend's characters. He offers to help Django, saying "when a German meets a real-life Siegfried that's kind of a big deal."[48]

Another instance of excess manifests in Leonardo DiCaprio's villain, Calvin Candie, whom Nama calls "the epitome of the Gothic villain . . . a decadent aristocrat and the perfect picture of internal moral decay."[49] A decidedly dimensionless character, Monsieur Candie (as he prefers to be called) is ignorant, vain, and appears to love nothing more than watching his own slaves kill or be killed. When the director first introduces him, its amidst a brutal Mandingo fight. In Tarantino's characteristically bombastic style, the camera crash zooms into Candie's face, revealing a set of rotting teeth which literalize Calvin's "moral decay." The tendency to give evil characters physical disfigurements or ugly features existed long before the emergence of the Gothic romance, (see Shakespeare's *Richard III)* but certainly is one of the genre's many "marks." The face of Leonardo DiCaprio, long considered one of the best-looking actors in contemporary cinema, only throws Candie's blemishes into sharper relief. Not long after the group leaves for Candieland, Calvin feeds a runaway slave to his dogs. In fact, Calvin Candie's climactic scene is the most blatantly Gothic moment of the film. When Calvin's Head House Slave Stephen alerts him of Django and Schultz's plot to steal Broomhilda away, Calvin reenters the dining room carrying a leather bag, from which he gingerly removes a human skull, placing

[48] Tarantino 2012, 00:50:21.
[49] Nama 2015, 109.

it on the table atop a velvet pillow: the skull of his old caretaker named Old Bill. Although an obvious reference to the archetypal Gothic image of skeletons or decaying remains, Candie's intent in displaying the skull is academic rather than ornamental. Cutting into the back of Old Bill's skull with a saw, Candie explains that in his research on the superior science of phrenology, he had discovered the reason that slaves were so obedient. Two dots found within the skull, the location of which signifies the most developed part of an individual's brain, were always found in African slaves near the section of the brain most associated with submissiveness. Django, realizing the jig is up, reaches for his gun. Candie screams violently, slamming his hand on the table, and orders his man to put a gun on Broomhilda. Suddenly, Monsieur Candie is the man transformed, the madness and decay within ultimately revealed. Although the audience was aware of Candie's cruelty, his implosion reveals its true extent, and starkly contrasts the seemingly easily manipulated, id driven man we'd come to expect. Furthermore, the revelation tracks with another common trope of Gothic horror, the villain unconvincingly masquerading as a well-mannered aristocrat. Calvin Candie is deliberately a character without subtlety or dimension. Having cut his hand in smashing it on the table, Candie wipes the blood across Broomhilda's face: an act so excessively grotesque that Candie, like Django, moves beyond the realm of the real or historical into the fantastic.[50]

Despite *Django's* regular employment of the "marks" of Gothic Horror, I disagree with Nama that those references overwhelm the marks of the Western. The film should still be qualified primarily as the latter before the former. In fact, many of the tropes Nama considers

[50] Although the cut on Mr. DiCaprio's hand was an accident, his choosing to wipe real blood across actor Carrie Washington's face could not have been more readily Gothic had it been premeditated.

to be Gothic are also "marks" of the Western. In many respects, the classical western is nothing more than a regionalized form of the Romance, often with a specifically Gothic sensibility. I'd like to briefly return to each example above of the film's supposed uniquely Gothic characteristics. To begin, the scene wherein Django wears the "Blue Boy" costume, and his face and hands are blurred by the mirror. As previously stated, the costume and shot do in fact endow Django with something extrinsic to himself: namely, the power to murder white men for the sake of justice. However, that role falls directly within the Leonean Western's mythic "righteous seeker of revenge" archetype (from this point, I'll refer to this mark at the "Stranger archetype"). Furthermore, the play between the myth and the man is a common theme in the Classical Western. Next, the bathing scene, which Nama cites as evidence of the presence of the supernatural, is more likely a simple hallucination or daydream within Django's mind. While the distinction does not necessarily mean the supernatural is not a factor, otherworldly elements of Gothic Horror are universally literal. Broomhilda is not actually dead, nor does she possess any kind of spiritual powers. Regarding the story Schultz tells Django, and his perceived connection to it, the legend does offer evidence that Django has assumed a role more important than saving his lost love. However, the involuntary assumption of duty extrinsic to the protagonist's original goal is common in the Classical Western—present in films such as *Stagecoach*—and therefore does not exceed its limits. Regarding Calvin Candie, I agree with Nama that his character does not fit within the normal parameters of the classical western. However, certain aspects of his character are similar to the classical western villain. First, Calvin represents the major obstacle standing in the way of the protagonists ultimate goal, and simultaneously represents the major obstacle of the larger goal at stake: the task to which the

protagonist has been unwillingly assigned. Secondly, as a member of the pseudo-aristocratic society of the Antebellum South, Calvin represents civilization, form which the Western hero will always seek refuge. Finally, Candie's most integral motivation (at least consciously) is his desire for wealth and power. According to Calvin, the sole reasoning for his anger at Django's attempted rescue of Broomhilda is his being swindled by the other men. As greed is the primary motivating force behind expansion and the march of civilization westward, it generally stands in opposition to the western hero. Often, the villain is, or is directly connected with, rich men looking to expand their empire by settling and thereby owning the West.

By including elements of the Blaxploitation and Gothic Horror, Tarantino engages in exactly the kind of contaminating genre mixing that Derrida describes in his essay. As such, is it possible to discern whether *Django* falls within the Classical Western genre, or more appropriately, its framework?

In certain key ways, *Django's* structure directly mimics the classical western. For example, the protagonist fits exactly Deleuze's description of the archetypal Western hero. According to Deleuze, the milieu or environment of the hero creates a problem which only he can solve. Django's is twofold. His primary goal is to save his wife. However, as a black former slave in the Antebellum south, Django is forced to crash through the barriers that role denotes. In doing so, he inadvertently becomes a symbol of black collective fury, and as is repeatedly stated throughout the film, Django was the only man who could have done it. He was "that one in ten thousand." Although Django's exceptionalism is by virtue of his race, he also fits the mold of many a Western hero. For example, Django finds that he is preternaturally a crack shot. Furthermore, he is able to subject himself to emotional and physical abuse that other slaves

could not withstand in order to win back his bride. Therefore, he is uniquely suited to fill the gap left by his environment.

I have spoken at length about the role of spectral images in *Unforgiven*, where they serve as a constant reminder of Munny's past as well as drive home his drastic reversion in the final minutes of the film. Spectral images also play an important role in *Django Unchained,* both with and without the protagonist's knowledge. Nama goes into great detail about a few of these spectral images. Specifically he mentions Django's hallucinations of Broomhilda as he crosses the South in search of her, and the spectral image of Django in the mirror in the "Blue Boy" costume. Nama, however, limits these images to examples of Django's "gothic excess", which is certainly present but I think an oversimplification insofar as their effect. That generalization, I believe, led him to the erroneous assumption that the film is more gothic than western.

In order to unpack this, I would like to return to the scene with Django and the Brittle Brothers, but begin with a shot that takes place shortly after the brothers' deaths.

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[51] Tarantino 2012, 00:40:14.

In the shot, as Dr. Schultz hands the plantation owner the handbill for the Brittle brothers, every man and woman within the vicinity has come to watch. The lens is in shallow focus, with all the foregrounded characters rendered in sharp detail, and the slaves and gnarled tree in the background blurred. Each character participating in the action is clear, but the bystanders, who are seemingly unimportant, are not. On its own, the technique is unremarkable. But on closer examination, the background is not simply blurred, but almost kaleidoscopically distorted. The tree, the three black figures on the right, and the white figure just to the right of the warrant seem to shimmer and bleed into one another and their environment. The three black forms on the right stand as if unaware anyone can see them, and the middle white figure, a scarecrow, has both arms lifted level with its chest, and looks as if it is headed toward the other three. In other words, they look like specters. Unlike Broomhilda, these specters do not appear solely within Django's mind, nor do they participate in any way in the action. Furthermore, they are physical entities within the diagesis of the film, rather than literal apparitions. The shot simply renders them temporarily ghostlike as they watch Django and Schultz. In fact, that is their only role: they act as witnesses.

I have previously stated that this film is in no small part about a collective racial fury, conscious or subconscious, within the African American community for the wrongs committed against them under American slavery. As a result, Django's quest for his wife and for personal vengeance, and his ultimate success, means more than the satisfaction intrinsic to his actions. His small victories and ability to kill white slavers with impunity offer some hope to all black slaves. Each success is a success for his entire community. Keeping this in mind, I believe these

spectral figures are stand-ins for that community. They represent all slaves both past and present, come to watch Django act out his personal revenge in lieu of their own.

This interpretation allows a clearer image both of the mirror shot of Django in costume, and the multiple instances wherein Django hallucinates images of Broomhilda. In this former image, my interpretation therefore mostly aligns with Nama's. Imbued with the strength of all black folk in addition to his own, Django becomes a "mythic character, and as the narrative progresses he increasingly becomes a figure who exceeds the logic, rules, and requirements of realism and historical fact . . ."[52] He becomes a superhero of sorts, something beyond the regular and mortal. The mirror, however, is not important insofar as it references the gothic tendency to use them to reveal characters that are cursed, but because it emphasizes Django's new status as a representative of his entire race and their desire for revenge. In other words, the mirror renders Django anonymous as he takes on a new mantle. That status plays directly into a trope of the Leonean Spaghetti Western: the "Stranger Archetype."

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[52] Nama 2015, 110.
[53] Tarantino 2012, 00:36:01.

While Django is an exceptional, almost super-human being, he is also endowed with a kind of unwitting utility, in that he finds himself capable of killing white men as a former black slave with no consequence. He thereby extracts revenge for all black folk through his own personal quest. That more global utility makes Django a mythic hero, but can theoretically exist outside of his character in other beings. Relative to this unwitting function, his own personal goals and indeed his sense of self do not matter, and render him an anonymous figure to the people who encounter him. The other black folk in the film occupy the position an audience member would in a film like *A Fistful of Dollars.* The Stranger enters the story anonymously, affects the lives of the people in the community in a meaningful way, and leaves before the community can glean any specific information about him. Although he enters the town for selfish reasons, his actions before riding away ultimately add up to heroism, motivated by a desire to right the wrongs of his past. In *Dollars,* when the Man with No Name frees Marisol from the Rojos, he claims he does so because something similar happened to people he cared for. Django is similarly haunted by his inability to protect Broomhilda as a slave, which translates to two initially selfish motives: win back his wife and kill the white men who hurt them or stand in his way.

The scene wherein Django escapes from the men taking him to the LeQuint Dickey Mining Company is a microcosm of the *Dollars* plotline. Django at the outset of the conflict has only the selfish desire to escape. In the process of trying to achieve that aim, however, he helps the other men on the way to the mines, who acknowledge their savior but know nothing about him. Django's connection to the other men is apparent not through the situation, but due to their implied shared experiences as former slaves. When kills the slavers and leaves open the

cell in which the other men are kept, this scene marks the first time Django wittingly helps other men without ulterior motive. He thereby knowingly cements his Stranger status.

His legendary status is acknowledged in at least two more shots in the film. When Django returns to Candieland to retrieve his wife, (for which he kills all the overseers and thereby frees all the slaves) he finds her in a shack on the property, presumably awaiting punishment or possibly sexual abuse by the men of the plantation. When Django opens the door, he casts his shadow over her bed. The silhouetted broad shoulders and cowboy hat

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at first render Django an anonymous figure, and Broomhilda cowers on the bed, fearing the worst. But as soon as Django speaks, the score, composed in part by Ennio Morricone (who, not coincidentally, composed the score for the *Dollars* trilogy) swells to a crescendo. The effect is almost comical, as the film continues to up the ante on its desire to render Django an epic hero. In the final scene of the film, Django finally seems to understand his new status as the mythical liberator of a tormented race. His identity as an individual has become secondary to this

[54] Ibid. 02:34:51.

identity. He puts on Calvin Candie's clothes to illustrate both his new role and continuing ability to kill white folk without consequence. With a candle in his hand, he appears as a kind of distorted apparition of Candie himself. His dominant position is additionally illustrated in standing literally over the other characters returning to the house after Candie's burial.

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His ironic assumption of Candie's status in Candieland also serves to reiterate that Django is not only a liberator, but a harbinger of vengeance against those who subjugate his race.

Another element of *Django* that threatens to upend its status as a Western has to do with geography. Quentin Tarantino calls the film a "southern" rather than a western. Classical westerns take place in the then sparsely colonized western frontier land of the American continent. Much of the action stems from the protagonist's relationship to an environment lethal by its very nature, whether though the elements or Native Americans. The shift eastward to an already civilized region of the United States, therefore, would seem to nullify any resemblance the film might have to the classical western. I think, however, that Tarantino shifts the geography for a simple reason, and still—both visually and structurally—creates a western.

[55] Ibid. 02:36:40.

The geography must shift because the American Antebellum south is the only place contemporaneous with the classical western that allows for a conflict couched in race relations. Were *Django* to take place on the frontier, the racial element of the story would not cause nearly the conflict that Django's blackness incites in and of itself. Furthermore, that geographic shift allows for a striking reversal of western power relations, which in turn seeks to highlight the often racist undertones of the classical western. Ironically, the white folk in this film pose a threat to the protagonist similarly to the problems the presence of Native Americans generally does for a film like *Stagecoach:* that is, they are threatening by their very presence.

Notably, Tarantino reinforces the film's "western-ness" through employment of many of the visual motifs common to the classical western. For example, early on in their journey, Django and Schultz rest in the midst of a rocky canyon, a landscape inextricably linked to the genre. What's more, Tarantino chooses this environment to set up the rest of the plot, and initiate Django's transformation from former slave to righteous liberator. Moments later, he informs Schultz of his wife's story, and Schultz recites the German legend from which Broomhilda is named. And shortly after, as Django and Schultz ride into a nameless town, Tarantino shoots them from below as they ride into a sunset. *Django Unchained* is unique among the three films I discuss in the sheer volume of genre mixing that takes place. However, since genre is by its very nature characterized by contamination, I do not believe it thereby exceeds the limits of the western genre. I attribute this simply to the auteuristic nature of the films of the Postmodern western. Tarantino, who possesses an immense knowledge of each of the other genres I discuss in this chapter, among scores of others, uses the realm of the

Postmodern western as a playground on which to explore the effects immersing the western within them has on its makeup.

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When I began writing on this film, I was convinced that many more similarities would be found between it and *No Country for Old Men* than between it and *Unforgiven.* But now, I unequivocally believe the latter. Django, like William Munny, finds himself aligned much more closely with the movement-image than with the time-image. In fact, the only clear difference between Django and characters like the Ringo Kid are his blackness, and the unique challenges associated with his status within the film's milieu. Despite those unique challenges, though,

[56] Ibid. 00:25:33.
[57] Ibid. 00:26:48.

Django is in complete control, quite literally freed from the chains of acting as observer. Where the film differs from other subgenres of the western, then, is primarily its values. The film focuses its near classically western protagonist in the body of a black man. Furthermore, it reduces its white characters to nearly one-dimensional buffoons, a common habit with Native Americans in classical and even Neowesterns. It thereby serves as a heavy social critique of the racist tendencies of the older films. To be fair, I am not entirely sure that the commentary/criticism was intentional on Tarantino's part. In fact, I believe he often engages in the very Blaxploitation-style fetishizing the film so often references. Examples include the overt sexualization of Broomhilda, and the Mandingo fight Calvin Candie subjects his slaves to when first he meets Django. Furthermore, Tarantino can at times be insensitive to the very racial issues he intends to highlight. His white characters tend to overuse racially insensitive terms, which perhaps lends an element of realism, but often borders on the disrespectful. Intentional or not, though, the critique is startling. The destruction of the plantation at the end of the film, in addition to throwing into stark relief the horrors of the institution of slavery, also offers a critique of one of the most prominent systems of early capitalist society. As such, *Django* wholly rejects the values of the classical western. Furthermore, it heavily muddies the marks of the genre, rescued only by Django's resemblance to the movement-image protagonist, and perhaps the cowboy hats. That said, it removes itself so strongly from the traditional world of the western, in addition to reversing its values, that I do not believe it may be called a Postwestern. Rather than incorporating both Neo- and Post-, it seems to desire neither. The rejection, however, hinges on knowledge of and conversation with both subtypes of the genre. Therefore, it must also be a Postmodern Western.

Chapter 3

Joel and Ethan Coen, and *No Country for Old Men*

No Country for Old Men Does not necessarily explore the social implications of the Classical Western, in terms of an attempt to rectify past sins or reinterpret the Western considering cultural evolution. Other works by the Coen Brothers, such as *True Grit* or *The Big Lebowski,* do explore these questions. *No Country,* instead, is about mythology, age, and decay: the decay of a culture, or the decay of a man and his sense of self. More than anything, it is couched in ambiguity**.** The lines delineating myth from reality, human from inhuman, good from evil, and even civilization from the wild are never clear. The film adopts visually many elements of the Western: sweeping, desolate vistas are often contrasted by claustrophobic interior scenes. The Coens admitted that their and the audience's awareness of the Western genre and its marks was "integral" to its message and sensibility, particularly regarding the landscape, which was a "character itself."[58] Their formal and visual commitment to the images most commonly associated with the genre underscore the film's subversion of Western plot, character, and values. According to Campbell, "The Coens interrogate genre by participating in it, playing with its various forms, and skillfully manipulating the knowledge built up by its audience to deterritorialize the assumptions and values bound up with their understanding."[59] Their work as a whole is an investigation of pervasion of genre, precisely implementing the process of contamination and "parasitic economy" that Derrida describes in his essay. Not only that, but their characters often examine the merits of various philosophies, always to—

[58] Campbell 2013, 331.
[59] Campbell 2013, 332.

inadvertently from the characters' perspective—"flatten" them. For example, *The Big Lebowski* contains elements of noir, surrealism and indeed the Western. It explores issues of deconstructionism and post colonialism. *No Country for Old Men*, as a Western of sorts, is the perfect avenue for exploring similar issues because the marks of the genre—the region, the visual motifs, the dust and the hats—are all tied up in philosophy. But the Coens surgically remove the moral philosophy of the American West, and *No Country* tracks the aftermath. Their intent, unlike Tarantino's and Eastwood's attempts to assert or condemn that philosophy, is to claim that perhaps the men on which that moral philosophy was based never existed. The culture of the West is dying, as its men start to realize their values were built on tall tales and mythology and they are confronted with a world too complex to comprehend. Or, perhaps such epiphanies are recursive, and simply come with age. Bell muses in the novel that, "when the lies are all told and forgot the truth will be there yet."[60] At any rate, confronting the true nature of the west while upholding its visual language is as disheartening to the audience as it is to Ed Tom Bell. More than either of the other two films I discuss, it is a "posthumous"[61] work. That said, I don't agree with Campbell that it must necessarily "fill the empty frame." In fact, in this instance, that is why it stands apart from the Postwesterns after 1945. The frame is made from the formal and visual language of the Western. But it remains empty. In this respect, it is exactly like Deleuze's time-image. Incorporating elements of both subgenres, this film is the purest example of the three I discuss of the Postmodern Western.

[60] Cormac McCarthy, *No Country for Old Men* (New York: Knopf, 2005), 123.
[61] Campbell 2013, 2.

In 1894, Frederick Jackson Turner posited to an audience in Chicago his frontier thesis. Essentially, he believed that expansion and the existence of a frontier had been the single most important factor in developing an American identity. Through the continual pressing into an ever-shrinking land devoid of law and settlement, Americans developed a "coarseness and strength combined with acuteness and acquisitiveness," a "dominant individualism."[62] In other words, our self-image is intimately connected with the desire to explore the unknown and conquer it. But since 1890, all the land in the Continental United States has been claimed. We achieved our supposed birthright, manifest destiny, but perhaps sacrificed what made us American along the way. The Classical Western takes place almost exclusively within the years between the Civil War and the eventual closing of the frontier. Films like *Stagecoach* and the *Dollars* trilogy are compelling and ultimately quite romantic because the protagonists' quests are inherently doomed. The untamed West was a place of refuge for Ford's protagonists. It contained the promises of equality, prosperity and freedom. Its anonymity leaves room for men's deeds to grow to legends. Westerns are in many ways often comparative studies, the juxtaposition of an idealized cinematic past and a real present which rarely measures up to what we believe came before. There is a bitter irony watching the cowboy ride west into the sunset, because we know one day there'll be no more worlds to conquer. Regardless, much of our American identity remains linked to ancestral desperados. The Classical Western genre grew to prominence during a time of political and social turmoil in the United States largely because I think people still desired to connect with that simple reality, where right and wrong

[62] "Frederick Jackson Turner's "Frontier Thesis." The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History. Accessed March 30, 2017. https://www.gilderlehrman.org/history-by-era/development-west/timeline-terms/frederick-jackon-turners-frontier-thesis-0.

were still discernable. Mostly it's simple escapism. However, they are still firmly entrenched in certain regions of the United States, and West Texas is one of them.

No Country for Old Men is the story of a man forced to confront the harsh reality that his values no longer apply. Although Ed Tom Bell is one of three protagonists in the film, his rambling monologues are its moral and emotional core. Through them, he attempts to parse out and somehow come to terms with the events that transpire between Moss and Chigurh. As they proceed, Bell becomes increasingly befuddled by Chigurh's ruthlessness. He realizes that the kind of man Chigurh represents is so far beyond Bell's ability to conceive or understand, that he'd rather retire than face it. His final monologue, though given context for the first time as he tells his wife about his dreams, offers no closure or solution: no way to collapse his realizations into material his old self could comprehend. The Coens pluck a classical western (in terms of values) character and thrust him into the real world. In doing so, he and the audience both start to think that perhaps their idealized conceptions of the West never existed at all. The west was ever harsh and unforgiving. Its hold on the minds of Americans was a projection we used to attribute some degree of order and "rightness" to the world. As in *Liberty Valence,* we have chosen the myth. But *No Country* asserts that it has always been this way.

In order to more thoroughly explicate this claim, it's necessary to take a step back and examine each way the Coens choose to blur delineations that explicitly exist in the world of the Classical Western. The first of these, the separation of myth from reality, is the most complex in relation to the Classical Western. Mythology, particularly as they relate to making a man into a myth, is generally accepted as fact, or in some cases, it's a choice the perpetuators of the myth make to preserve some perceived good the myth imparts. Either way, its effect is benevolent.

(i.e. *Liberty Valence)* In Postmodern Westerns such as *Unforgiven,* the primary task of the protagonist is to dispel the myths surrounding them, whether of themselves or others. In films like *Django,* the desire to deflate mythologies extends to an entire culture or region. But *No Country* reverses this tendency. The protagonist, rather than the region, chooses without his knowledge to believe the myth, only to have it slowly dissolve in front of him without his consent.

In the first moments of the film, Ed Tom ruminates wistfully on his early days as a sheriff, when men of his profession needn't necessarily wear a firearm. "I always loved to listen to the old timers. Never missed a chance to do so."[63] The audience is not immediately aware that Bell has formulated an idealization of his and his ancestors' collective history in the face of harsh contemporary realities. As he speaks, the camera cuts to stills of the vast, desolate landscape of West Texas. Soon after, though, Bell seems to admit that his philosophies are already beginning to fail him. He describes a boy he sent to the electric chair, who felt no remorse for the gruesome murder of a young girl, even after he was sentenced to death. Bell wonders how the "old timers" would have handled the situation, but ventures no guess. However, he does not realize that his failed attempt to comprehend the young man might signify a flaw in his worldview. An officer, presumably one of Bell's deputies, arrests a man somewhere out in the desert and drives him to the station. He phones Bell to assure him that "[He's] got it under control."[64]

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[63] *No Country for Old Men.* Directed by Joel and Ethan Coen, (Santa Monica, CA: Miramax, 2007) 00:01:15.
[64] Ibid. 00:03:11.

Suddenly the man (who of course is Chigurh) throws his handcuffs around the deputy's neck and suffocates him. From that point forward, Bell can gain no measure of control over the events that transpire. He consistently arrives at the scenes of Chigurh's crimes too late, only able to impotently pick up the pieces and attempt to glean some understanding of what occurred. His experience does him credit where this is concerned. He cleverly deduces that Chigurh killed the man from whom he stole the car with a cattle gun. He still can't fathom Chigurh's character or motives, but as the film progresses he seems to stop trying. After he meets with Moss' wife in Odessa, Bell returns home. While sitting at a diner, he describes to his deputy a story in the paper about a couple who tortured and murdered old men and women, cashing the social security checks once they were dead. Upon mentioning that authorities were only alerted when one of the torture victims ran outside wearing only a dog collar, Wendell snorts sheepishly. After briefly looking askance, Bell says soberly, "That's alright, I laugh myself sometimes."[65] His worldview slowly crumbles before him.

Moss' death is the last straw for Bell. He briefly meets with an old friend and fellow officer. The other man complains about young people with "green hair," and Bell acknowledges they're both men out of their time. The El Paso sheriff doesn't seem to recognize that for Bell, it's the needless nature of the violence, more than its happening in general, that most perplexes him. He decides to retire shortly after returning home, and goes to visit a relative, one of the old timers to whom he once so eagerly listened, and among whom he now ranks. He confesses that his worldview is—seemingly irrevocably—shattered. "I feel overmatched. I always felt when I got older, God would sorta come into my life somehow. And He didn't. I

[65] Ibid. 01:27:31.

don't blame Him. If I was Him I'd have the same opinion of me that he does."[66] Such a strong oath from Bell could only have been wrought from desperation. Likely, he felt after what he'd seen that there was no God at all. The idea of an all-knowing God which lends the universe order is inextricably tied to the Classical Western philosophy: good and evil exist in the world, and it's the mission of the good to eliminate the evil. And most importantly, in the end, those who do evil are punished—justice will out. Rejecting Judeo-Christian ideologies means the rejection of the mythologized Old West. He doesn't renounce it or deny its existence, but merely believes he must be an exception. Ellis responds with a story about Bell's great-uncle, who was a Texas Ranger and presumably one of the men Bell had always looked up to. Uncle Mat was shot in cold blood by a group of Native Americans, who sat watching him as he died. Finally, he says "What you got, ain't nothin' new . . . it ain't all waitin' on you. That's vanity."[67] Ellis speech is not exactly reassuring. He assures Bell that his loss of faith in the old, noble men of the West was inevitable. They were always a fantasy, constructed from the belief that the world is just.

Although Ed Tom Bell represents a reversal in who, if anyone in the Postmodern Western, accepts the philosophies of the Old West, that does not mean he is additionally a reversal of the rugged individualist heroes of traditional Western films. While William Munny is an anti-hero who has a choice to accept of reject the role of hero in *Unforgiven,* Ed Tom is never cast as such. From the beginning, he is a bystander, with no real power to change the inexorable course of the plot. The traditional Western, as Deleuze puts it, leaves a gap between

[66] Ibid. 01:45:20.
[67] Ibid. 01:47:24.

the hero's milieu and the conflict of the film that only the hero can fill, thereby restoring balance. Neither Bell nor Moss, nor even Carson Welles, can fill that gap, try as they might. The gap then becomes a vacuum. Westerns always contain a hero and a villain: the hero's main responsibility is to stop the villain from harming the innocent. Carson and Moss both exhibit certain attributes of the Classical Western hero. Carson is overly confident, handsome, and supposedly a talented hit man. Moss cares deeply for his wife, and tries to defend her. But neither of them can successfully ward off Chigurh or achieve their goals. Possibly, because neither character exhibits individually the necessary elements of a Western hero. Carson is vain and selfish, and Moss simply has not the strength. So Chigurh fills the vacuum left in the absence of a protagonist. As a result, he is the only character whose deeds drive the action, and therefore he can wreak havoc with impunity. Chigurh actively tests the limits of this role, continually finding himself unimpeded. The only order or justice in the film springs from his warped conception of fate, or perhaps determinism. He uses his philosophy as a scapegoat, never taking moral responsibility for his actions. Those whom happen upon him while he is in need were meant to do so. His brand of mercy is flipping a coin, and allowing the potential victim to call it in the air. The world of the film subjects the other characters to Chigurh's moral philosophy. Anyone attempting to impede it is punished, including Chigurh.

After Moss is killed by the drug cartel, Chigurh returns to Odessa to seek out his wife, having made a promise to Moss over the phone that he would kill her. Carla Jean returns from her mother's funeral to find Chigurh sitting in her room, waiting. As she tries to convince Chigurh that her death is unnecessary, he flips a coin, saying "It's the best I can do."[68] But she

[68] Ibid. 01:50:29.

refuses. “The coin don’t have no say. It’s just you.”[69] For the first time, Chigurh looks befuddled. Presumably he shoots her a few moments later, however, as the next shot shows him walking from the house.

Carla Jean’s refusal to call the coin, and Chigurh’s decision to murder her anyway, causes a disruption in the world, as evidenced by the following scene. While Chirgurh is usually the harbinger of this world’s brand of justice, his decision not to play by the rules must be punished. As Chigurh drives away, he is T-boned by an oncoming car.[70] He survives the initial collision, but whether he survives the aftermath of his wounds is unclear. A piece of bone protrudes from his arm and blood vessels have popped in his eyes. He pays a young boy for a shirt to use as a sling, and limps away. Whether the gap Chigurh leaves is rectified by the accident is unclear. But if the world indeed subscribes to Chigurh’s philosophy of justice, it is unlikely he’ll last the night.

Chigurh’s final scene provides no concrete answer to the questions it inevitably elicits. By no means is it clear cut. The overriding problem is one of control. Does Chigurh really fill the gap left by the hero and thereby gain power to manipulate the world? He is only one of a few possibilities. First, perhaps a greater, metaphysical power holds sway, a kind a deity. Whether benevolent or otherwise, a Godlike deity could provide some sort of order and meaning to the events of the film. Certainly, given the region and time, most of the characters would believe in a Judeo-Christian God. The Classical Western generally assumes a measure of divine control, the hero one order below, and the villain(s) standing in opposition to both. A deity defined by

[69] Ibid. 01:50:56.
[70] Ibid. 01:51:15.

Christian idealizations of justice and morality gives the hero strength and the weight of authority.

For two reasons, I would strongly argue against this interpretation. First, the characters who would be heroes possess no meaningful authority or control, implying they lack the "weight of right" that a deity provides. It's possible that an evil deity controls the world, but this is unlikely. No evidence is provided for a vengeful God, other than the possible lack of a benevolent one. Undoubtedly, at least some reference to the cosmic would have come from Chigurh. He implies belief in an ordered universe, but it in no way resembles religion. Secondly, the only explicit reference to God confirms that He has no control over what has happened. What's more, it comes from Bell, the moral center of the film. "I always felt when I got older, God would sorta come into my life somehow. And He didn't. I don't blame Him. If I was Him I'd have the same opinion of met that he does." This line, coming from any other character would not necessarily be law. But the audience funnels its knowledge of the world through Bell's, and his slow disillusionment is the only honest assessment we're offered.

The final two possibilities I find almost equally convincing with respect to plot. However, I believe a more convincing argument can be made for one given the visual language of the film. The first of these is that the vacuum is never occupied. The absence of a hero allows the action to unfold on its own. There is no grand design, and nothing is in control. Chigurh is allowed to carry out the murder of dozens of innocents because he realizes this, and exploits it. Bell and Moss, for instance, both have real or perceived entities watching over them and limiting their decisions. Moss has his family, presumably some form of moral framework, and after he steals the money, the Mexican drug cartel. Bell has his wife, a (at first) steadfast belief in traditional

Western values, and to a certain degree (perhaps) even the audience. Even Carson Welles, despite his apparent lack of conscience or connection, must answer to his company. Chigurh, by contrast is, as Bell dubs him, a "ghost." Originally he seems to employed by the Mexican drug cartel. As soon as he has the information he needs, though, he shoots his employers and heads after the money himself. His nationality is unknown, and even his name is mysteriously without cultural origin. The only man who knows anything about him, Carson Welles, is an enemy, and has possibly never spoken to him directly. In fact, throughout the little interaction Chigurh has with other characters, he seems genuinely baffled by their way of thinking, and studies them with anthropological detachment as if they were of a different species. Possibly he comes from nowhere, a manifestation of the violence inherent to the West. Regardless, the only quality required for control in a world with no guidance or consequence is a willingness to remove all obstacles to power. All that is left is action and chaos.

I disagree with this interpretation as well. Chigurh himself exhibits significant evidence that control is extrinsic to those who inhabit the world. Namely, he himself adheres to a moral philosophy that he perceives is greater than himself. Chigurh is an unstoppable force, who defies Bell's ability to comprehend to the point that he is forced to retire. From his decision we can assume that 1) Chigurh's value system—at least regarding survival and propogation—is the dominant of the two, and 2) it is by virtue of this system that Chigurh controls the action of the film. He isn't in control of it, but just the reverse. While the nuances of it are not altogether clear, he definitely believes in fate or determinism. Carson Welles visits Moss while he is in a hospital in Mexico. When Moss asks why he wouldn't make a deal with Chigurh in instead of him, Welles says that Chigurh would kill moss anyway "just for inconveniencing him . . . You

might even say he has principles. Principles that transcend money or drugs or anything like that."[71] The little insight we're offered into the mechanism of this system occurs when Chigurh is about to kill three people: Carson, Carla Jean, and the man at the convenience store. Of these three interactions, only the possible murder of the gas station clerk is unmotivated by anything but their meeting one another. But Chigurh implies that the meeting was nevertheless inevitable. He flips a coin, telling the man to call it, as usual. When asked what they're "putting up", Chigurh says "you've been putting it up your whole life. You just didn't know it . . .I can't call it for you, it wouldn't be fair."[72] Chigurh believes that the man's death is not up to him. It was either dictated or not by some other power. He is simply the conduit: a kind of grim reaper or harbinger of death.

So, if the force exerting its will on the world isn't God, Chigurh, or nothing at all, then what is it? I believe it is, quite literally, the land. As the Coens already suggested, the geography is its own character, and therefore has its own desires and needs. In the Classic Western, the land is distinctly anonymous, offering up either danger or refuge, but morally neutral. However, as the sweeping landscapes of the West became synonymous with the Western genre, it also took on their set of values. In other words, a cinematic reversal of Jackson Turner's Frontier thesis. Those who inhabited the fictional world shaped its character. The Coen brothers turn this cinematic trope on its head. Seemingly out of a desire to better reflect the reality of the west, they implement Turner's thesis directly. The land is an active character that shapes the characters in the world. Bell, Moss and Welles fail to recognize this, so the world engulfs them.

[71] Ibid. 01:17:48.
[72] Ibid. 00:24:27.

By contrast, Chigurh is a physical manifestation of the land, its product, and personifies the harsh realities to which the people are often subjected. Death often seems meaningless, but we are led to it inexorably. Violence is unavoidable, and peace is fleeting. Most importantly, our attempts to manipulate the world to our benefit is ultimately futile, because we are hopelessly "overmatched." Evidence for this interpretation abounds. In terms of dialogue much of it occurs in the final minutes of the film. After Ellis tells Bell the story of his Uncle Mat's death, he says, "What you got ain't new. this country's hard on people."[73] Ellis undoubtedly knows about Chigurh, or at least as much as Bell told his wife. But to him, Chigurh is unexceptional. He does not blame what's happened on Chigurh, or believe it's a sign of changing times as Bell does. It's just the country. In a way, his philosophy actually resembles Chigurh's. At the very least, he has accepted that the land rather than man is in control. Ellis was shot in the line of duty and forced to retire. Bell asks if he would seek revenge if the man responsible was set free, and is surprised to receive a no. "All the time you spend tryin' to get back what's been took from you more's goin' out the door. After a while you just gotta try to get a tourniquet on it."[74] Ellis has, in his old age, accepted his fate.

The final scene of the film is hopeful, despite Bell's epiphany. Up to now, the men of the film fool themselves into believing they have a measure of control because the alternative would be too difficult to bear. However, Bell's dreams indicate another option. Recognition can lead to resignation, and eventually to peace. In his second dream, Bell watches his father ride off into the wilderness, carrying a horn full of fire. "In the dream I knew that he was . . . going

[73] Ibid. 01:46:56.
[74] Ibid. 01:44:39.

on ahead. He was fixin' to make a fire somewheres out there in all that dark . . . and I knew that when I got there he'd be there."[75] Bell's dream depicts not the west of the Classical Western, but the Turner West. That is to say, it's still a land that shapes its people. But Bell's father has learned to survive, and even thrive while acknowledging he has no control, and may not understand. The fact that his father waits for him means that Bell will come to that point sometime soon. He is not there yet, but he's still moving forward. Eventually, he will have peace.

As previously stated, this interpretation is further evidenced visually, through the images conjured by the Coens and their cinematographer Roger Deakins. Before delving too deeply into the visual mechanisms of the film, I'd like to explicate a few points regarding Deakins's style, particularly in relation the Coens work more broadly. He is their director of photography on almost every project, and thus, much of their aesthetic stems from his personal style. Those tendencies have become so much a part of the Coens' film grammar that a decision to break from them is as informative as adhering to them in any shot. Most importantly, Deakins has a unique style when it comes to shooting bodies, particularly in scenes of dialogue. He almost always shoots a conversation between two characters from inside the space of the conversation, giving each character a single shot almost directly in front of them. Furthermore, the lenses are usually short and wide, capturing not just the character but the environment they inhabit, and exaggerating the character's movements. Also, the camera often slowly pushes in as it lingers on an individual, highlighting a particular element of the their. For

[75] Ibid. 01:56:32.

example, if he wishes to imply accentuate a character's tendency to talk to much, the camera will push in on their mouth as they babble.

The overall effect of these habits can differ, even using the exact same techniques, based upon the desired effect. An emphasis on the environment can humanize a character or swallow them up. The wide angle lens can render someone alien and unintelligible, or goofy and self-conscious. A switch from shot/reverse shot from inside the conversation to over the shoulder of one of the characters can build suspense and foreshadow violent action. Alternatively, a decision to maintain the angles and cuts in a scene while dramatically altering the content of the characters' conversation can be either unnerving or humorous. I would like to enumerate a few different means by which Deakins's style affects and informs the film. First, I will return to my earlier objective.

These techniques are incredibly important in conveying the presence of environment—its control over the action—in *No Country*. As I stated earlier, the empty frame Campbell asserts the Postwestern fills with new ideas, in this film is left empty. But the frame itself is still composed of the film grammar of the Classical Western. Deakins perfectly conveys this idea in the opening shots of the film. Beneath Bell's ruminations on the old timers, the Coens insert a montage of shots of West Texas. Each shot accentuates the vast and desolate expanse of the landscape, with no single element of singular focus in the mise-en-scène. Nothing living pervades any particular scene, but they're shot the same way Deakins frames a conversation: well balanced using a short, wide lens that exaggerates distance. But where a person should be, there is only emptiness. After about a minute of shots of the plains, the Coens begin to cross cut with shots of a windmill, each one closer to the object than the last. It enters from the right

side of the frame and shifts slightly leftward as the shots transition from long shot, to medium long, to medium. The object moves into the frame from right to left. Cinematic convention dictates that objects moving "forward" travel in the frame from left to right. As such, the windmill moving in the opposite direction in relation to previous shots suggests literally going backward in time, as the elements slowly reclaim the land occupied by the object. The last still shot before the action begins centers the object in the frame. It is obviously old, spotted with rust. The use of a windmill in particular is important, due to the object's intended use: to harness the power of the environment in both input and output. Wind turns the turbines of the mill, which pulls groundwater to the surface. It is clear that the windmill is in disrepair, and that its output may no longer sustain anyone. The initial shots of the machine surrounded by West Texas plains render the object insignificant by comparison, and by the last shot of the object, it seems more likely at the mercy of the environment than to hold any kind of power to shape its surroundings.

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[76] Ibid. 00:01:38.

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I believe the shift from desolate but grand expanse to the broken-down mill illustrates through montage a gradual decay: both a material and cultural one. The shots increasingly isolate the object from its surroundings, which in turn become flatter and less dynamic, identifiable, or forgiving. As the images close in around the object, it seems to transform into a powerless spectator separate from its surroundings, destined to watch itself deteriorate. The windmill,

[77] Ibid. 00:01:56.
[78] Ibid. 00:02:03.

therefore, is a stand in for Ed Tom Bell, and in a larger sense all natives of the west. He is an observer, watching his perception of the values and codifying elements of his own culture slowly be stripped away, the region to which he connects to be conquered by elements beyond his control or ability to comprehend. As Bell serves as a stand-in both for other western people and for the audience, it can be assumed that the windmill represents them too.

This ability to observe but not to act on his environment falls neatly within Deleuze's conception of the time-image illustrated in *Cinema 2.* Using the classical western formula, characters in milieu of the film always maintained the power to act successfully on their environment. In a sense the ending was always certain: good will triumph over evil, the cowboy will ride away victorious into the wilderness. The post-war protagonist, on the other hand, is more an observer, unable to always affect his milieu. Ed Tom Bell is a character trapped within the latter scenario, a cinema emphasizing the time-image, but does not recognize it. He is an observer still convinced of his ability to affect the environment.

An important and oft-employed element for the Coens in general is their tendency to shoot characters within their environments, often for the purposes of characterization. For example, in the scene Carson Welles speaks to his employer about Chigurh, the directors frame the man with the high-rise buildings of Dallas surrounding him, an environment alien to the rest of the world of the film. His surroundings serve the dual purpose of characterizing both the man and the job for which he has hired Welles: they exist as part of a well-organized, likely illegal, business enterprise which outranks the small conflict at work between Chigurh, Moss, and Bell.

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The Coens also use a character's environment to characterize them in the scene between Chigurh and the gas station clerk. The man is behind the small counter, surrounded by a paraphernalia of car parts and faded smiley-face stickers, an old piece of construction equipment behind him. These items denote that the man is industrious and hardworking, but poor and uneducated.

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[79] Ibid. 00:54:23.
[80] Ibid. 00:24:30.

The Coens repeatedly—in this film and in their larger body of work—employ environment to allow the audience a quick read on characters we're not given a lot of time to get to know. In *No Country,* however, these shots often serve another purpose, and both of the previously mentioned shots incorporate it. Each of them contain two planes: in the foreground, the character is indoors and surrounded by material of their professions, an environment that is unique to them and as such characterizes only them. But they also contain a window, which serve as a portal through which the audience gains access to a larger environment, extrinsic to them. Both portals contain objects describing the characters' milieu, and represent varying degrees of success in controlling it.

I'll begin with the latter shot. The old and rusted tractor is the only clearly discernable object through the window, placed directly between the man and the edge of the window, so as to remain clearly visible throughout his exchange with Chigurh. The remainder of the backdrop is an ill-defined wasteland. The tractor in this shot serves much the same purpose as the windmill in the opening shots of the film. It is an object intended to help people shape the environment to their needs: cutting grass, hauling crops, etc. But the object seems to sit idle, in disrepair and disuse, its tires obviously flat and the chassis falling apart. Since the man lives his life in the country, the closest analogue to the frontier of the classical western, the tractor indicates his trials and failures to affect his milieu. Like the windmill and tractor, the man is ultimately an observer.

The businessman's relation to his surroundings is a bit more complex. Geographically, by moving to the city, the man has removed himself as much as possible from the milieu of the frontier. He has no control over the environment outside the window, but neither does he

seem to want it. As such, he could have been a man who acknowledges his own role as observer in an ever more incomprehensible world. The man's company hires Carson Welles, however, and thereby endeavors to govern the milieu of the frontier remotely. Their effort is ultimately fruitless, as demonstrated by the man's brutal murder at the hands of Chigurh, in front of the very same windows.

These shots are less important for the individual characters they describe and situate, as they are notable for their proximity to the final shot of the film. After Ed Tom Bell's experience with Chigurh and the eventual death of Llewellyn Moss, the sheriff decides to retire. The final scene of *No Country* is a simple conversation between Bell and his wife, as he recounts to her a dream he had. The scene is shot in a series of singles, in much the same way Roger Deakins consistently shoots conversations in the Coens works. As Bell tells his story, the camera almost imperceptibly pushes inward. Rather than focusing in on a particular aspect of Tommy Lee Jones' face, as the Coens often do while pushing in, the camera is slightly off center with respect to the actor. By the final shot, the camera contains only Ed Tom Bell, and the window behind him. The frame is also angled slightly below the actor's face. The position allows Jones to position his face directly in front of the lens, forcing himself to look up at the actor across the table, accentuating his sheepish self-consciousness. The natural light coming from the left side of the frame casts a shadow on the other side of Jones' face, accentuating the deep furrows of his brow and the lines beneath his eyes. Somehow, the Coens have rendered Ed Tom both ancient and childlike, frail and uncertain.

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In the last two shots I described, the characters were surrounded by the material of their immediate, indoor environment as well as the exterior milieu. This shot, on the other hand, contains almost nothing but the two frames: the window, and the frame supplied by the camera. This isolates Bell from everything but his exterior environment. In fact, even the color palette of the shot highlights Bell's connection to the exterior: the soft green and brown of the walls and of Bell's clothes bleed out through the window into the background, blurring the lines between it and the foreground and thus demoting the latter to equal status, even while the objects through the window are slightly out of focus. The largest object in the background, directly behind and to Bell's left, recalls the shot of the gas station clerk in particular. Far from a piece of fading industrial equipment, however, this time the object is a tree. The difference between this object and the manmade objects consistently highlighted before is important both for characterizing Bell's mental state after the action of the film, and for situating the film relative to the Deluezian time-image and the other films I have discussed.

[81] Ibid. 01:56:28.

Clarifying the object's meaning necessitates an analysis of Bell's dreams, the final lines in the scene. I mentioned briefly before that the dream, while ambiguous and qualified by the inevitable snap back to reality, is hopeful. Bell's subconscious seems to tell him that the west of his father and the old-timers—in other words, the founding myth of the west largely created by the classical western—can still exist. Perhaps the west which contained the frontier and allowed intrepid men to build their own lives only survives in this dreamlike state. However, the tree, and its formalist connections to Bell as a characterization tool or even an epithet, suggests that while Bell may not possess legitimate control over the milieu, as did men of the classical western, he can still coexist with it peacefully.

I would like briefly to mention another aspect of the shots containing frames, or rather frames within frames, in the film. *No Country* is a film about ambiguity: the meaninglessness and randomness of violence, the arbitrary and fabricated dichotomy of good and evil. Quite possibly the most famous western of all time, and a film which does not quite fall within Deleuze's description of the Neowestern, examines similar themes in its protagonist. The final shots of *the Searchers*, in my opinion, employs the same frame within a frame technique, inspiring the tendency in *No Country* to foreground the character in the interior but lend equal weight to their exterior environment. The shot tracks Ethan Edwards as he departs from the action, having fulfilled his decision to find and Debbie and rescue her from the "evil" Comanche.

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In the shot, the interior space—inside of which the camera sits— is so dark from shadow that it almost looks as if Ford suddenly narrowed the film's aspect ratio. Light spills through the doorframe, in essence foregrounding what should be the background of the shot. Just like the final shots of Bell in *No Country*, the shot suggests a feeling of redemption in the protagonist through connection with their milieu. Ethan seems finally to gain a modicum of peace, but must leave for the frontier, an outsider to civilization. Bell, on the other hand, recognizes the impracticability of a life like Ethan's, and resigns himself to living without control of the milieu. Bell's redemption is not the result of his own actions, as Ethan's is, but a simple acknowledgement that the world is not what he believed, and that it's okay.

A codifying element of the Coens' and Deakins' film grammar is the way they choose to shoot conversations. I mentioned briefly earlier that generally they are shot from within the space of the conversation, usually placing each character slightly to the left or right of center. They use a shallow, wide angle lens, which allows a pleasant balance between the character

[82] *The Searchers.* Directed by John Ford (Burbank, CA: Warner Bros, 1956).

and their environment. They tend to shoot conversations in intimate singles such as this regardless of context within the film or the specific dialogue in the scene. Doing so simultaneously plays up the comedic elements of the scene, and any empathy the audience feels for the characters. Shooting both tragic and comedic moments in this way muddles the boundary between the two, thereby visually emphasizing the moral ambiguity of the film. The audience already is not sure how to feel about the characters morally, because Chigurh seems to be the only character who possesses legitimate agency. The other characters, particularly Moss, can only react to the inevitable. The Coens reinforce this confusion visually.

Take, for example, two different conversations with Chigurh. In the first, he speaks with a woman at the front desk of Moss' trailer park, in an attempt to discern which of the trailers belongs to Moss. The woman refuses to tell him. At this point, the audience has come to know

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[83] Joel and Ethan Coen 2007, 00:34:09.

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full well Chigurh's willingness to murder people for getting in his way. Therefore, we observe with a sense of foreboding. The woman, on the other hand, has not context through which to interpret the conversation with Chigurh, and mistakes his confusion at her defiance with stupidity. Nonplussed, she repeats that she cannot give Chigurh the information he seeks. Chigurh walks away perplexed. It is unclear why he decides not to kill the woman. Perhaps he doesn't even know. In another scene, Chigurh happens upon a man while stranded on the side of the road with a dead car battery. Their conversation is staged in precisely the same fashion.

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[84] Ibid. 00:34:11.
[85] Ibid. 01:34:13.

 [86]

The viewer cannot help but laugh at the man's obliviousness and joviality. Visually, Chigurh makes no telltale gesture of either amusement or anger with the man, at least no more so than he does with the woman at the motel or the man at the gas station, both of whom left their exchange alive. Chigurh is impatient, however, and asks the man if he can remove the chicken cages from his truck bed. In the next shot, Chigurh sprays down the truck bed at a carwash, clearly having murdered the man. His unpredictability throughout the film adds tension to every exchange, each one rendered humorous or tragic only after it occurs. Ironically, however, they render the conflict between he and Moss unavoidable: we never truly hope for Bell's success in the face of a man consummately undeterred. Furthermore, the inconsistency belies the connection between Chigurh's character and the milieu he inhabits. As the scene between Ellis and Ed Tom confirms, the violence the west inflicts on those who inhabit it is ultimately indiscriminate and without meaning. Chigurh is the embodiment, at least from Bell's perspective, of that idea. Incredibly, the Coens translate this visually while working within the framework of their established film grammar.

[86] Ibid. 01:34:36.

No Country for Old Men is an incredibly complicated film, both structurally and visually. Its meaning overall is difficult to parse, and remains largely open to interpretation. I have chosen in this chapter to believe that the final moments of the film suggest a hopefulness in Bell, and by extension hope for the western region, which the film so beautifully illustrates in disrepair and decay. Hopefulness to what end, I am not sure I could say. It would seem overly optimistic, given the inexorably bleak tone, to predict a resurgence in the west of the kind of living the old-timers supposedly did. In fact, the film discredits that way of life as a fanciful creation. As such, it goes much farther than the other two in realizing the kind of bereft observer Deleuze says characterizes time-image cinema. Bell seems from the start to have lost something he nor the audience can identify. But far from reasserting the values of the western and retelling similar stories of Manifest Destiny and the American Dream, the film reveals the impracticability of those principles. Furthermore, the film exceeds the boundaries of the Neowestern is in its formal language. Although it often recalls the imagery of the classical western, and even to an extend maintains a similar geography, the temporal shift to a near present Texas surpasses the growth of civilization the classical western consistently predicts, landing on a region beyond that growth and now in decline. As such, this film is a perfect example of Postmodern Western cinema.

Conclusion

Why do we need this new category, the Postmodern Western? The simple answer is, because I think until now a space in the critical conversation did not exist that could fully contain these films, while simultaneously allowing them their uniqueness and separation from other films under the western genre's umbrella. I felt that an attempt to classify them based on existing frameworks—Postwestern, classical, or Neowestern—muddled the way that we view both these specific films, and the films which fall more readily into one of the three former categories. Postmodern westerns go beyond both the creation myths of the classical westerns and the revisionism of the Neo- or Postwestern. They can assume both discourses and then tell stories which incorporate the two. They do not exclusively contain the marks or elements of either subgenre, participate in them both without belonging. They can, and do exist somewhere in between. That said, the Postmodern Western is a genre far from fully defined, and each of these film's success within that framework is relative. For instance, were it on a spectrum with the Neowestern on the left, the Postwestern on the right, and the Postmodern Western in the middle, *Unforgiven* would be notably left of the center mark. *Django Unchained,* on the other hand, would drift to the right. Comparing those films with *No Country,* I believe, centers the final film directly in the middle. What makes these films, and this subgenre, special, is their ability—through the deft employment of sophisticated visual techniques, and a deep knowledge of other American cinema—not to pigeonhole themselves to the genre by employing its marks, or limit themselves to simple revisionism or a statement of values. They are great genre films, yes, but they are also just great films, able to tell stories which transcend the ideologies of classical western cinema. Perhaps the most important mark of the

Postmodern western, then, is formal and visual complexity. Their nuance affords them the ability to avoid retelling the same stories of the invention of an American identity, and instead illustrate how American identity has evolved. In many ways, the relationship that Postmodern Westerns have with their filmic predecessors mirrors the relationship between postmodern American identity and our knowledge of the past. We do our best to acknowledge that those semi-mythical stories of rugged individualism continue to shape the American psyche, but recognize its flaws. Just like the western, we are still coming to terms with those mistakes, and trying to move beyond them in an increasingly complicated world. These films, like all good cinema, are a reflection of us. We need the Postmodern Western because it helps us know ourselves. One thing is for sure: the Western won't be dead so long as we maintain a conversation with the values and landscape that made it.

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